AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Christine E. van Belle for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 9, 1996. Title: The Magnitiseur and Other Stories.

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Abstract Approved: _____

Marjorie Sandor

This thesis is a collection of three short stories and the beginnings of a novel. A similar thread is woven through all the stories: in the attempt to know spiritual truth, what it is to be a woman, and to know themselves, the various protagonists precariously oscillate between the seemingly conflicting wisdom of their known community and mysterious outsiders. At times, the characters find themselves drawn to different poles within their very communities. Two of the stories, "The Magnitiseur," "Charm Course," and the novel with the working title, Behind My Grandmother There is Darkness, are directly set in the world of my upbringing, an insular Dutch immigrant community. This community is rooted in the Reformed Protestant tradition, dating back to John Calvin's 16th Century Geneva. The third story, "Foreign Expert," although set in the alien environment of northeastern China, touches on similar issues of isolation, focusing on an individual in an unfamiliar environment who seeks her place and in some ways herself. Stylistically, I admire Eudora Welty and Alice Munro and throughout the writing of this thesis, I felt their presence as writing mentors. Welty and Munro write with a rich sense of place and understand the effect of landscape, in a broad sense, on the individual. Thus, this collection

is influenced by many sources: my rich, four-hundred year old heritage, the story-telling methods of Welty and Munro, and of course, my own imagination.

The Magnitiseur and Other Stories

by

Christine E. van Belle

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Christine E. van Belle, Author

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I am also grateful to Jim Anderson for his quiet, contemplative ways. Before Jim I had seen red tail hawks, English sparrows, and columbine, but had not known they were there. I have learned the difference between scrub jays and Stellar's jays. I want to thank him for the solace he provided for me, as I madly juggled a crazy graduate schedule.

Additionally, I would like to thank Kim Casebeer, Sarah Groen-Colyn and Char Vander Hoek for being extraordinary, inspiring women. All throughout these stories, as Nabokov writes, "you too are there, beneath the word, above the syllable, to underscore and stress, the vital rhythm." Without these women, these stories would not be.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother who encouraged me to be definite and sure, make quick decisions and don't look back. And thank you to my father, who taught me to be slow and calculated and careful. With their opposite natures, they both taught me how to approach the mystery of words: to consume them and at the same time meditate over

their meanings. In some ways, this thesis began many years ago in our family living room, when they read aloud to me, The Chronicles of Narnia, and The Hobbit.

For my parents

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The Magnitiseur

If I angle it just right, I can balance my bum on the rim of the car's open trunk. The door hangs over me, sheltering me and my violin from the drizzle. Liza and my mother stand in the doorway of the house arguing about whether or not Liza's skirt is wide enough for her cello. The smoke from the muffler chugs onto the driveway as Dad gives the car a little gas. It smells like the Texaco up the road and my dad's workshed.

Through the smoke I see Mr. Adducci, our neighbor, feeding the ducks on his property, weaving around the ponds he's built for the birds. Mr. Adducci has always lived next to us. He's the only Italian in our Dutch ghetto just outside Toronto. My dad calls him the *magnitiseur*: the Magnetic Man. I've heard people say he can heal all sorts of things just with his hands. "It's either unexplained science or a miracle," my dad has said. But my mother wants nothing to do with that "hocus-pocus voodoo stuff." When she walks from the front door to the car, I see her glance over at Mr. Adducci and smile politely with her lips shut.

Mr. Adducci has billowy grey hair and tan chiseled features, similar to my uncles and the other nurserymen in church. But mostly, it's his hands I notice--his gnarled, browned hands that dip into his basket of seed and sprinkle the food on the lawn. I hold my breath expecting lightning bolts to sizzle from his fingertips. Just beyond him, through the drizzle, I can make out the faintest hint of the

Toronto skyline. The shadowy figure of the C N tower pokes at the clouds like a reminder of the Tower of Babel. He looks up for a moment and waves either at my dad behind the wheel or what he can see of me in the open trunk. When I look at his face, though, even from twenty yards away, it seems he is looking right at me, his eyes shaded by wispy, long, grey eyebrows.

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On the stage, my sisters and I practice before the service but have to stop when Mrs. Huisman says it's time for the prelude. While she plays "O Sacred Head," we go to the back of the sanctuary. Mom and Dad are waiting for us there so we can all walk in together. "You go to church as a family," according to my mother.

We find my mother talking with the pastor's wife and when she sees us, my mom says, "Here are my little women." Mrs. Vander Ley smiles. She wears bright pink lipstick and cups my cheek.

"You girls look so nice," she says. "We're so blessed with your talented family."

Mother laughs, and the big curls in her hair bounce slightly. "Now, they don't need big heads before they play."

Dad motions that we should sit down and heads into the sanctuary. He shakes the hand of the greeter, Mr. Buss, who pats each one of us on the head as we pass him. My mother brings up the rear with a "good morning" and we parade down the center aisle to our usual spot.

On the back of the bulletin, Kay draws pictures of us. She draws big violins and cellos like they are floating on the page and in the background are four stick figures lying down with X's for eyes. She

titles it: "The Faint Sisters." *Cut it out*, I mouth to her and push her hand so a long scribbled line mars her drawing. She elbows me in the side.

I pull my fingers and rub my knuckles while the minister preaches. My stomach growls a few times and Mom, on the other side of Dad, shoots me a look. *Why didn't you eat*, it says, and I know I should have, but I just can't before a performance. I imagine someone pulling their face to make their eyes Chinese. My stomach feels like this, like there are lots of hands stretching my insides in all directions. The arch behind the minister seems to point to infinity and if I turn around and squint my eyes, I can't see where all the rows of chairs end; they just go on and on as if everyone on the planet has come to church today. Because the sanctuary has padded seats with arm rests, Kay thinks it looks like a movie theatre. She draws a big screen with stick figures sitting in rows. "Why don't we have pews?" she says. "Every other church has pews except ours."

My dad breaks open a roll of Mentoes and squeezes a mint to the opening. He is about to pass them down the aisle to my sisters and me when my mother swats his hands. He looks at her and she mimicks a bow on a violin. My father nods. She doesn't want our fingers dirtied before we play. I reach for the mints in Dad's hand and lean across him towards her. I whisper, "Mom, it's no big deal."

But if she's heard me I don't know it because she just stares straight ahead at the pastor and keeps her hands steady on the hymnal in her lap. Dad shrugs his shoulders and smiles at me. "Next Sunday," he whispers.

Pastor Vander Ley finishes finally, with "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," and starts in on the congregational prayer. My sisters and I creep out of our seats and tread quietly up to the front. Four tan folding chairs behind music stands face the congregation in a semi-circle. We walk so softly that I can almost hear myself breathe. Kay and Joy are near me, and we lift our violins out of their velvet linings simultaneously. I don't dare look at Kay because she can give me incurable giggles. That has happened once; my stomach shook so hard I thought I would throw up, but I didn't let out a sound. Mother never knew.

When we walk to the metal chairs, we each hold our violins under our arms like we were taught. We move as quietly as we can, but even the hushed sound of our nylons, brushing beneath our taffeta skirts, calls attention to us. Several people open their eyes and I'm embarrassed to have them watching my sisters and me tip-toe across the stage.

When we finally reach our chairs, I look out on the congregation and see Mr. De Veaux, the youth symphony director. He watches us. He's smiling and I know he's pleased to see we'll perform. He's getting good mileage out of my sisters and me. "Such talent in one family," he always tells my mother, though he doesn't seem to think that separately we're that outstanding. None of us has ever made it past fourth or third chair. My mother also watches us. She furrows her eyebrows and holds her finger by her mouth, her lips pushed out in a *Shhhhh*. Then she smiles and overexaggerates the straightening of her shoulders, indicating we should do the same.

Pastor Vander Ley finishes praying and on cue, Mrs. Huisman, on the organ, gives a punctuated nod in our direction. We all hit the first note at the same time. The congregation stands with hymnals in hand and our introduction is muffled by squeaking chairs and flipping pages. When they start to sing, the sound booms out like a powerful force. They sing the first verse in English, and the second one in Dutch. It is so loud, I can barely hear Liza's or Joy's or Kay's strings. I sing quietly to myself in English to keep the time.

***

It's rainy out and there's little room underneath the awning as my father fiddles with the keys to open the front door. Liza and I stand in the rain so my mother's guests, Mr. and Mrs. Veenstra, can have a little shelter. My mother chairs the Hospitality Committee at church and has already apologized to her guests for the rain. But they say they don't mind it.

When my father opens the door, I instantly smell the pot roast baking in the oven. Dad takes our coats and hangs them in the closet. Before Mom ushers us all into the living room, she pulls me aside and I give my violin to Joy to put away. "How about those almond squares?" my mom says and bends down so we're eye to eye. "I think the Veenstras would like some."

Her skin looks smooth and milky and I'd like to touch her cheek. I almost think I might, but then she stands and pats my back on the way to the living room. I know what to do and I go to the kitchen to join my sisters.

Kay stands at the stove with a spoon in one hand and a box of corn starch in the other, slowly stirring a pot of gravy. Liza kneels by the open oven, pouring drippings over the roast and Joy and I put almond squares on a tray. The phone rings. I answer it in the dining room.

"This is Tante Verna." She says *Verna* like a question. "Which one are you?"

"Tilly."

"Tilly, how are you? You tell your father, I'm not sleeping on the floor another night with that brother of his."

I tell her to hold on, and call my dad. "It's Tante Verna," I say when I hand him the phone.

After my sisters have snatched two or three, I bring out the almond squares. While I'm passing them around, my mother asks who's on the phone. When she hears it's Tante Verna, she excuses herself from the guests saying, "That's Ed's sister-in-law. Better go say 'hi'."

Dad holds his hand over the mouthpiece and whispers to my mother, "They've made an appointment with Mr. Adducci." She motions him to stretch the cord around the corner into the kitchen. Once by the refrigerator, she points in the direction of the living room and mouths, *our guests*. Dad nods.

Dad says yeah, yeah, a few times and then, "Sure you can stay with us." And, "No, no. Just bring a gift or the province gets him for practicing medicine without a license."

Mom shakes her head. "Ed," she says.

Dad holds up his hand to her and then looks the other way as if that will help him hear better. "What was that, Verna?"

When he hangs up the phone, he smiles and squeezes Mom's shoulder. "It'll be okay, *schat*," he says. "He's my brother, yes?"

She doesn't say anything and looks down at her hands and twists a ring on her middle finger. I'm not sure if this is a fight. Usually my father tells me, "Whatever your mother wants." But this time, he just stands there and looks at her.

"Now, nobody knows where this power comes from," she says. "It's a strange business."

"Okay, okay," Dad says. He rubs her shoulders and tells her to relax. This is about Verna and Jan, he says, not us. And my mother smiles weakly and says they can finish this later.

"Okay, girls," she says. "Let's not neglect our guests."

I jog back and forth between the kitchen and living room with a pot of coffee. Dad isn't saying much but reclines on the couch listening to my mom and winks at me when I refill his mug. I offer the guests another almond square and then my mom and dad and set the tray on the coffee table.

Mom reclines in the lime green chair and I notice a tassle from her collar hangs dangerously over her tea cup. When I head back to the kitchen, I turn around and she's watching me. *Your coffee*, I mouth to her and point to her mug. She looks down and sees her tassel nearly floating and discreetly pulls it out. I watch her hands as she does this. I have always wanted nails like hers: long, well-filed and always pink and white. Just like the models in Paris, she used to say. But like my sisters, my nails are short and have no tip, necessary for the viola, violin and cello. Joy could never have nice nails at all--Mom said she sounded like she was ice skating on the piano. Lately,

though, I've noticed something about Mother's hands, or maybe I'm just getting older and now understand what's always been there. Her hands are a bit pasty and thick and her pale skin puffs up around her rings.

Kay and I get out the extra leaf for the dining room table. Joy tells us to do silverware while we're in the dining room. We each take an end of the oak silverware chest and set it on the table. Inside, the velvet lined box holds all the shiny silver forks, spoons, and knives, stacked neatly in their own places. We fold the linens under each setting and only until we tell Mom it's time to eat, and she and the guests stand up, do we begin carrying in the food from the kitchen.

Mother walks in behind the guests, smiling at us. Our hands are full of pot roast, whipped potatoes, and cheese-sauced broccoli. She has done this a thousand times. The guests stand behind the table; Mr. Veenstra holds the back of a chair. I point to a chair for him, but glance at Mom to make sure this seat is okay. She nods, but then diverts her eyes around the room, considering people's places and I guess she's remembering who's right or left-handed. Mrs. Veenstra stands by the window, looking out on the patio as if not interested in sitting down until she's directed towards a place.

"That's quite a garden your neighbor has going," the woman says suddenly. All of our attention instantly shifts from the steaming food before us, to Mr. Adducci's smoking chimney and the long rows of vegetables stretching out behind his house.

For a moment my mother's face looks betrayed, but she says, "Some people these days are just crazy. Organic this and organic that."

She glances outside with polite interest but then examines the table again with the questions of seating before her.

"I'm impressed," the woman says, still eyeing Mr. Adducci's yard.

Mother pays no mind and says, "Sit, sit, everyone. The food is getting cold."

The woman turns from the window and smiles at me, then sits down. I stare at the steaming food and wait for every last person to get settled. There is a moment of silence when Joy, the last to leave the kitchen, places hot rolls before Mom and then sits. Mom looks at everyone and then holds her hands open before her. Liza and my father, sitting on either side of her, take her hands and then we all clasp hands, ready for prayer. "Let's remember Jan and Verna," she says. "That's Ed's brother and sister-in-law," and looks at our guests as she explains. "Jan has awful back problems and it's been really hard on Verna." Then she closes her eyes and bows her head so we all know it's time to pray.

***

After school, we climb the huge Doug Fir on our property before going inside. Secretly, I like to be up in the tree and look down on Mr. Adducci's yard. He's always doing something interesting outside. Liza waits at the bottom. Joy shimmies up first, then Kay, then me. I need them to show me where to put my feet. To reach the lowest branch Joy balances on the wobbly wooden fence separating Mr. Adducci's place and our yard. The fence, taller than even Joy, has always been shaky and unstable. Beneath our feet, strips of burnt red paint crumble to the ground in brittle pieces. When Joy is a little higher than the lowest branch, she leans down and taps the spot where we need to place our feet. "Here," she says and points to a nook in the branch. Even a

small ways up the tree, you can see for miles and miles, past Lake Ontario to a fuzzy almost invisible Toronto skyline.

The trunk blackens our hands as we climb higher and higher. Tiny pieces of bark fall on me from Joy and Kay's runners and I don't want to look up and get bark in my eyes. But in a minute the chips stop falling because Kay and Joy have stopped. When they see me look up at them they start chanting: "Toothpaste, toothpaste, peanuuuuuuuuut butter!" These are our only known cures for when we get pitch in our hair.

I stop for a moment and straddle a prickly, wide branch. Thick clumped strands of hair stick to my cheek. When I touch it, my fingers glue together and I separate them with a jerk. If our mother gets ahold of me, she'll cut out the entire patch of hair; there's no good reason to waste toothpaste or peanut butter because of carelessness. I'll have to wait for another time to spy on Mr. Adducci and I climb down the tree.

I go in the basement door to avoid her. There are still nails and plywood by the doorway from when my father partitioned three cubicles in the basement for bedrooms.

When my mother calls down the stairs, I'm lying on my bed rubbing my hands together. They feel raw from rubbing off the pitch. When I woke up this morning I could write my name on the window's condensation, but now the glass is dry; it's as cold inside the basement as outside.

"Tilly, it's your turn to do the wood today."

"Okay," I call and I don't move, but I can hear her upstairs. The kitchen door is already open and she is outside on the deck. I twist to the foot of the bed and look out my window onto the gravelly area beneath the deck off the kitchen. My mother's legs descend the stairs

outside and she steps with confidence and precision despite the drizzle and the slick wooden stairs. She rounds the corner so she now stands under the deck level with me and catches me watching her.

She turns her back to me and moves towards the woodpile. She begins balancing logs on her arm. If I don't get out there right away, she'll do it all by herself and never say a word, except when the fire by our music stands is all built, she'll look at me, neither frowning nor smiling, but say, "I don't like having to ask twice."

I scramble off the bed to go outside. When I get to the pile, she has already maneuvered two logs in a stack.

"Put two more on top," she instructs me. She is unafraid of the scratchy, knotted wood but I hesitate, slowly turning over a piece, touching it as little as possible until I see a relatively smooth spot, free of pitch.

"Tilly, just pick it up," she commands. I grab the piece and put it on top of my mother's other two.

"Wait here. We'll do one more load." She heads through the basement door, thick, tall, carrying the wood as if it were a basket of balloons. Her back doesn't bow or slump even slightly with the weight of the wood in her arms. I cross my arms in front of me and squeeze my sides, shivering in the drizzle seeping through the planks on the deck.

Mother and I build a fire in the basement so my and my sister's hands won't turn blue while my sisters and I practice. We crumple newspaper into long twisted strips and stuff them in nooks between the logs. I sit at first but then stand; the cement hearth feels like ice beneath my jeans. Liza will practice by the fire, and then Kay and I will read in my room until it's my turn. Upstairs, Joy practices on the

piano for an hour and then the violin. I barely hear her playing above the sound of Liza's cello coming from the other room. Even though Joy has to balance her time between the piano and the violin, I will never be as good as her. She is a natural talent. When I begin my practice, my ears are too close to my own violin for me to hear anything else except the sound of my own music.

My mother watches me play. She sits in the cloth green rocking chair and sips a mug of tea. Just beyond my music, I see her feet. Her pink slippers tap like a metronome, softly brushing the edge of the throw rug. During church, she says, she noticed that I sway my hips when I stand to play.

"It's unattractive," she tells me. "You'll be blessed with full Dutch hips, so let's avoid drawing attention to them as early as possible."

I straighten my shoulders, stiffen my back and focus all my attention on moving my arms, sliding the bow across the strings without one reverberation reaching past my hips. I pretend everything from the waist down is cement. I play through a minuet and she tells me to walk around the room as I play.

"This is good practice for you. Walk slowly and drag your feet behind you. Try to keep your legs stiff--think of your legs and hips as one solid board."

I do this for a few minutes but I can't stray too far from my stand because I haven't memorized this piece.

"Well," she says. "You think about it as you play."

***

Uncle Jan and Tante Verna arrive on a Saturday afternoon and Mom lines us up to greet them at the front door. When they get out of the car, Uncle Jan is clutching his back. Tante Verna kisses all of us, on each of our cheeks. We all watch Uncle Jan limp towards us. He steps confidently on his left foot and brings up the right one with a swinging motion. I place all my weight on my left foot, and imagine one hip being three inches higher than the other.

"Four hours in a car is murder for him," says Tante Verna.

Uncle Jan gives us a half smile and waves. Dad goes forward and shakes his hand.

The trunk of their car is slightly ajar, and held by bungee cords. A few spindly branches poke out and one has a red bandana tied to it.

"Girls," says Uncle Jan. "Why don't each of you grab a tree--there's six of them, Joy and Liza you can grab two each, and take them around back." When he reaches me, he pushes my hair behind my ear and smiles. His eyes are red and there are little prickly hairs all over his face.

"Tilly," he says. "Those trees will need a bucket of water dumped over their roots every morning. That'll be your job, okay?"

At the car, Joy is tugging at the bungee cords, the lid springs open all the way. In the trunk, black garbage bags hold together the roots and soil. Uncle Jan hollers for us to carry the trees by holding the bags. I slide my hands around the plastic and pull out the tree with the bandana. It's lightness surprises me and I stumble back a bit. The stem wavers but I rest the tiny tree trunk on my shoulder and go to the back of the house, towards the woodpile.

When we are finished setting them in a row by the stack of logs, my mother calls from the kitchen. It's time to play something for Uncle Jan and Tante Verna.

***

In our stockinged feet, Liza, Kay, Joy, and I quickly shuffle across the basement carpet. So far Joy's the only who has worked up enough static to zap someone. I target Kay and move towards her as fast as I can without lifting my feet from the ground.

"Kay!" I shout. "Let's all get Kay."

"No," Kay says. "Stay in the circle." Kay always wants us to stay in line, but I know Joy likes my idea when she winks at me and nods.

We shuffle in rotation, and Kay keeps shouting, "No one better get me. No one better get me." The carpet slides under my feet and I stick out my pointer fingers and swing my arms back and forth for momentum. I circle past the shelves of Mom's old teaching books and encyclopedias three times until Joy finally calls, "Okay, okay. Everybody, STOP!"

I freeze, and as quickly as possible, I reach out to poke Liza's back. Nothing happens. But on the skin of my own arm, I feel Joy's jab and the crackle of a small, sharp shock.

"Yowza!" she yells. And we all flop on the rug, giggling. Kay begins nudging my side with her head. When I lean up halfway, I see that her sleeves lie limply on the ground and her arms are bunched up inside her sweater.

"Look, ma," Kay says. "No hands." Without standing she manuevers to Joy and Liza and head-butts them. We all slide our arms deep in our

sleeves, pushing our elbows back until they pop through the arm-holes into the body of our shirts. Lying on our backs we move by pressing our feet against the floor and then pushing.

Joy jumps in and says, "No, this is better. Look, Mom's hands." She sits up and imitates the way mother looks at us while we practice, her finger poking at the air like a metronome.

I want to tell a man-with-no-arms-and-no-legs-joke, but I am laughing too hard.

"Tilly, Kay," Joy says in a screeching voice. "You are shaking entirely too much." She stands and begins to swagger from side to side without bending her knees. "A solid board! You must be as solid as wood!" she says. She takes off her socks and sticks her toes in our faces and we all shuffle as fast as we can to get away from her. I push myself across the room and then rest for a moment. I close my eyes and laugh so hard that I don't make any sound. I can't stop my sides from jerking up and down.

"Breathe, Tilly, breathe." The voice is not from my sisters.

When I open my eyes, I see my mother standing over us, drying a plate she's holding with a dishtowel. For a moment, no one says anything. We look around at each other, embarrassed to meet our mother's eye. It was Kay's turn to do the dishes.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say and hold out my hands for her to give me the towel and dish. "I'll finish."

But instead of handing them to me, she turns around without a word and heads upstairs. I look at Kay and she just shrugs her shoulders.

"Shit," Joy says.

"I'll go help her," I say and climb up the stairs. Without turning around, I can hear my sisters following me.

Tante Verna is in the kitchen and she is saying she needs some help carrying the trees to Mr. Adducci's. She and Uncle Jan are going to meet him today.

"Tilly, why don't you help us," Tante Verna says.

My mother quickly turns from the sink. "Verna," she says. But Tante Verna interrupts her before she can go on.

"It's either you or one of the girls. Jan can't carry the trees and I'm not doing it all by myself."

My mother looks at me and doesn't say anything for moment, while her hands furiously swab a dishtowel around a wet plate. "Well, Tilly," she says finally. "You've been watering the trees, so I suppose you should help carry them." She says it like she's sorry to stick me with the job, but I am downstairs to put my shoes on before she finishes her sentence.

"Walk, Tilly," she calls after me.

Mom walks Tante Verna, Uncle Jan and me to the front door and before we leave she says, "Why don't you invite Mr. Adducci over for Sunday coffee while you're at it. It's about time we showed him what we're all about." She smooths out the hair on my back after she says this and smiles at me. But I feel nervous. I can't imagine Mr. Adducci sitting in our living room.

Tante Verna looks at my mother and laughs. "Are you sure, Nan? You don't have to do this for us."

But my mother just waves her hand as if say, don't worry about it, and shoes us out the door.

I have never been down Mr. Adducci's drive, past the duck ponds. A crunchy noise sounds with each step closer to his house and I'm waiting for the air to change or for the clouds to start dropping rain on us. On Mr. Adducci's doorstep, Uncle Jan makes Tante Verna and me hold the silver maples while he digs around for an envelope with cash in it. "Just a small gift," he says. I balance my trees on the ground.

I am surprised when it's not Mr. Adducci who comes to the door, but a woman. She wears faded jeans and a thick rainbow-striped sweater. Her face looks pale and smooth compared to my aunt's who wears blue eye-liner and thick tan foundation.

"You don't have an appointment, do you?" she asks.

"No," Uncle Jan explains. "We just wanted to drop off these gifts and arrange when we can see Mr. Adducci."

The woman nods and invites us in. "He's got someone else coming in, but he'll want to meet you," she says.

The front door opens to the living room. But there is no hallway or special closet for coats. After letting us in, she points to a tall oak coat-tree and says, "You can hang your jackets here." When she turns around, her long brown braid bounces against her back.

"Watch your step," she says and points to two stairs descending into the living room. She asks us to have a seat; Mr. Adducci is in the back finishing with a client.

"What about the trees?" Uncle Jan asks, and motions to the floor. The garbage bags are a bit dirty.

"It's hardwood. We can sweep it later." She leaves the room and her boot-heels tap the floor like a metronome.

We set the trees down and Uncle Jan and Tante Verna sit on the couch. The couch's worn down yellow velour reminds me of Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul's. I don't sit but walk around the room.

"Don't touch anything," Tante Verna warns me, and she quickly glances around the room as if unsure about where to rest her eyes.

There is a huge Persian rug spead out on the wall. The pattern is a swirl of purple, turquoise, and green. If I stare at the splashes of color, the wall itself seems to move. It makes me think of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp. Next to the carpet are several photos. None of them have frames, just thick pieces of brown and red cardboard, like the paper we use in art class. All the pictures are of strange people who wear odd dirtied hats and colored ponchos, and their faces are browned and wrinkly.

My mother would never allow such mismatched coloring. Delft blue and white line every room in our house. It reminds me of Spirit Week at school when we have to wear green and white everyday for a week. Except in our house it is Spirit Week all the time.

Most interesting in the room is an upright mandolin displayed on a small end table in the corner. It is painted bright sun yellow with blue and purple flowers circling the O beneath the strings. I lean close to examine its fretted neck and hear my aunt call: "Don't stare, Tilly. Just have a seat and be patient." I have never heard music coming from Mr. Adducci's house.

Before we see her, I can hear the tap of the woman's feet coming down the hall towards us. I sit down. Instead of coming into the room, she stops at the doorway and leans her head in, as if she doesn't want to go farther than she has to. "Here's Mr. Adducci," she says.

He comes in the room with a man on crutches. "Welcome," Mr. Adducci says and Uncle Jan and Tante Verna smile and nod towards him. "Hello, Tilly," he says and looks just at me. "Glad to see you here."

From where I sit the trees are taller than I. But through the thin branches and sparse leaves, I watch his tan and leathery face. He turns to the man with him and shakes his hand. Mr. Adducci pats his shoulder and hands him a band of dulled copper.

"You can use this, if you like, until the next time," he says. "Eleanor will show you out." And he gestures towards the woman. Before the man leaves, he smiles at us and holds up his copper bracelet, like a trophy.

"Good luck, folks," he says.

Mr. Adducci approaches Uncle Jan and shakes his hand, then Tante Verna and then me. I have to step around the trees to reach his hand.

"We won't take up too much of your time," Uncle Jan says. "We just wanted to drop the trees off and introduce ourselves. My sister-in-law, Nan, your neighbor, would like to have you over for coffee."

Mr. Adducci nods and says he could come on Sunday. He steps back for a moment, and the window behind his head makes part of his hair shiny. There are streaks of dull black and silver grey. He stands for a moment and looks at Uncle Jan without changing his expression. Then he reaches out and touches Uncle Jan's forearm, where his grey sweater's cuff meets his skin.

"Yes," he says. "You are in a lot of pain."

Uncle Jan nods. "I'm willing to try anything."

"We've been sleeping on a six by six piece of plywood ever since we got married," says Tante Verna. "Even with the slightest cushion, he can't walk the next day."

Mr. Adducci massages Uncle Jan's arm, moving up towards the shoulder.

"What am I supposed to do? Not sleep with my husband?"

Mr. Adducci releases Uncle Jan's arm but doesn't answer the question. Instead he pulls at his own fingers as if he is recharging them for his next session. But when he does speak, his voice is calm and sure. "I think I may be able to help you."

He walks over to a table holding the mandolin and picks a pipe I had not noticed earlier, lying next to the instrument. Without lighting it, he sucks on it for a moment and then points up to the carpet on the wall. "What do you think of my magic carpet, Tilly?"

I smile and hold on to the trees between us.

"It'll take you to strange and wonderful places," he says and gestures with his pipe.

Tante Verna grins at me and musses my hair, smiling nervously.

The doorbell sounds and Tante Verna and Uncle Jan rise on cue. "That must be your next client," Uncle Jan says.

When Eleanor gets the door, there is a woman with a scarf over her head and a young boy, maybe two or three years older than I am. She holds three loaves of bread wrapped in clear plastic bags. I stand behind the trees waiting for Uncle Jan to politely excuse us.

"Come in, Mrs. Havlinka," Mr. Adducci says. While Mrs. Havlinka and her son hang their coats, Mr. Adducci says to us, "So, tomorrow? Coffee?"

"Yes," Uncle Jan says. "Around one or so. We can arrange another appointment then. What should we do with these trees?"

Mr. Adducci goes to examine them as if seeing them for the first time. He fingers the leaves carefully and twists them from side to side, inspecting each tree. "This is a wonderful gift. Please, leave them here and I'll have Eleanor deal with them."

Before we leave, Tante Verna takes one of Mr. Adducci's hands in both of hers, and her eyes are red and watery. She pumps Mr. Adducci's hand up and down and says, "Thank you, Mr. Adducci. Thank you. We didn't know what else to do."

He smiles and pats Tante Verna's arm. "Have faith, Mrs. Hauge," he says. Uncle Jan has shuffled to the door and we follow him. Eleanor closes the door behind us. When we get outside, it has started to rain.

***

When I'm finished brushing my teeth I walk by the guest bedroom and see Tante Verna sitting in bed reading. This room used to be Kay's when she was a baby and there is still pink-giraffe-and-blue-elephant wallpaper. A small shaft of light from the desk lamp illuminates her hands and the book she holds. She sees me and motions me into the room.

"Hi there, sweetheart," she says. I stand close to the bed and she circles her arm around me. The thin pink blanket outlines her thighs and knees and the book she's been reading lies open on her lap so I can see the front and back cover at the same time. On the cover is a picture of a man kissing a woman's chest. The woman wears a business suit, but it is open and her shoulders are exposed. I've found books like this under Joy's bed.

"Pretty racy, huh?" My aunt smiles at me. I laugh though I'm not sure what 'racy' means. "It's okay in moderation," she says.

She slides down so her back is flat on the bed and sticks her arm straight out. "A few visits to the magnitiseur and we'll sleep in a bed like this all of the time."

"You'll have to go back?"

"A few times, yes."

"Is Mr. Adducci a Christian?" I ask and I run my hand along the satiny silver band of the blanket.

Tante Verna sits up again and plays with the ends of my hair. "I don't think so. I think he's Greek Orthodox or Catholic or something."

"Don't you think that's weird?"

"Yes, it's all a bit strange. But if it works," she says, "you never know. Maybe he's doing God's will and just doesn't know it." She hesitates. "But don't tell your mother I said that." And then she pretends to run her hands over me like I'd imagine Mr. Adducci doing and then tickles me.

"Now, off to bed with you and don't forget to say your prayers," she says as if suddenly remembering she is older than I am.

She gives me a goodnight kiss and I leave. But before I go out the door, I look at Tante Verna one more time, but she is already lost in her book as if I'd never been there.

***

In the middle of the night I wake up and immediately get out of bed, like I do on the mornings after I've had just the right amount of sleep. When I stand, my feet don't touch the ground. Instead, I float

over the carpet towards the window. The glass is ice cold and when I yank upward on the handle, the window effortlessly glides open. The air comes in quickly and I'm surprised to find it warm, even humid. It grips me as if large, invisible, marshmallowy fingers are tugging me outside.

Before I drift out the window, I clutch my music stand and it comes with me but my violin is beyond my reach. I glide slowly through the air, beneath the porch, past the woodpile and Uncle Jan's trees. My eyes begin to adjust to the night.

I hug the music stand close to me and I can smell its fragile oak stem. Ahead, the fence between Mr. Adducci's and our yard seems twenty feet tall. As I get closer, I brace myself, hoping that a surge of wind that will swing me over the top. But instead, as I near the fence, the gaps between the slats of wood expand and I slip through one without even a sliver.

In the corner of Mr. Adducci's yard are the ducks. The mama duck has her head beneath her wing and the baby ducks are huddled in a large furry ball, pressed against her. I hang suspended over the vegetable rows and then slowly drop to the ground. My feet reach the dark crumbly earth and the soil feels moist and cool between my toes--still, though, warmer than the thin carpet stretched over my concrete bedroom floor.

The corn stalks are a good half metre higher than I am. I lean back into a stalk and its leafy green arms circle around me, the tassles tickling my nose. After a moment, it releases me and I stand up. My music stand is lying on the ground and I pick it up and wedge it into the soil in line with the stalks. It is my gift to Mr. Adducci. When I am finished, three inches or so are rooted beneath the ground. I unfold

the wings and it looks like a blossomed flower, among all the other plants in the garden. Even though I'm in my white Laura Ingalls' country nightgown, I lie on the soil and make an angel like I would in the snow. The soft lumps of dirt trickle in my collar and sleeves like thousands of tiny fingers massaging my neck and arms. When I'm done, I close my eyes and I feel warm and cozy. I fall asleep holding the trunk of the music stand.

When I wake up, I am in my room. Though it is dark in the room, the morning light from the window brightens the foot of my bed. Across the room I see my music stand lying on the floor next to my violin case.

***

In the dining room, I put the candles and flowers on the floor so all the napkins and the tablecloth can be rolled up into one big mound and dropped down the laundry chute. The embroidered tulips disappear as I fold the cloth over and over and I listen to my mother tell Uncle Jan and Tante Verna about how long it took to find Pastor Vander Ley--our church called three ministers before he accepted. James Vander Ley was the last immigrant pastor we knew of in the area. After him, we would have had to resort to someone who probably couldn't speak Dutch.

"Which would have been fine as well," my father interrupts.

"Yes, but it's nice for the older people," my mother says.

The doorbell rings just as I drop the linens down the chute, and I answer it because I am the only one without something in my hands.

Mr. Adducci is standing behind the screen when I open the door. The smell of potatoes and beef gravy in the house is pungent compared to the cool fall air pushing its way inside. I unlatch the lock.

"Hello, Tilly," Mr. Adducci says and comes in. He smiles and the tiny white lines by his eyes disappear into tan creases. His head cocks to the side as if always ready to look up at the ceiling, or if outside, at birds overhead. I am unsure of what to do with him and we stand for a moment.

By the door is the delft tile with a picture of the *Vollendaam*, the boat that carried my father across the Atlantic. "That's my dad's boat," I say and point.

Mr. Adducci studies it and then taps the tile with his finger. "Very interesting," he says. "I came on a boat also." He takes the tile off the wall and kneels beside me so we can both look at it. He smells of charcoal, like when my dad grills chicken on the patio. A few long wispy hairs stick out of his ears and they look like shining silver threads next to his dark skin. "Ever been on a boat, dearie?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"This kind of boat doesn't look like so much fun. Too many people and not enough windows. But sailboating, why, that's a different story altogether." While he talks I watch his teeth, especially the odd one on the side, with the dark space around it, isolated in an otherwise straight row. He tells me about the boat that has been sitting in his driveway for as long as I can remember. His voice is scratchy but deep and he says the word boat like *boot*.

"Someday, I should take your family sailing."

"Yes," I say and nod. "That'd be nice."

When he stands, he palms the top of my head, as if to steady himself while putting the tile back in its proper place. I am about to

take his hand and lead him to the living room when I hear my mother's voice behind me.

"Mr. Adducci." She and Dad and Uncle Jan and Tante Verna are coming down the hall. "Sorry to leave you stranded here with Tilly. We thought she'd bring you to us."

Mr. Adducci squeezes my shoulder and says, "No, no. I was enjoying myself."

"Well, then," my father says and stretches out his hand. "Welcome."

They all go back to the living room, except my mom who follows me into the kitchen. Mr. Adducci needs a tea cup. I get out the *banket*, a real Dutch treat, my mom says, although we only have it when visitors are over. The brittle, outside crust flakes off in tiny pieces as I slice the cake.

"Don't cut them too small," my mother says. "Mr. Adducci needs a good taste of fine Dutch pastry." And even though all the dishes are washed and put away, she wants to use the nice china.

When the tray is loaded up, she takes it from me and says: "Go downstairs and get your sisters. Don't you think Mr. Adducci would like to hear you girls play?"

And she asks it in such a way that I know the answer is yes. She stands there with the tray in her hand, but her feet are planted. She won't leave the kitchen until I say, yes, I'll go get my sisters.

"I think Mr. Adducci would enjoy it," she says.

And I nod and smile as if my head knows what's right, but down below, where I should feel like cement, my stomach is full of butterflies.

My sisters and I carry up our instruments from downstairs. Liza comes last because it takes her longer to haul up the cello. She and Joy bicker all the way up the stairs about which piece to play. Joy said she's sick to death of "Waltz in E flat." We play this every single time guests come over. But Liza says why make things hard on ourselves. As soon as we reach the top of the stairs, they're silent and we all know we'll play the piece.

Mom has arranged four dining room chairs in a semi-circle. Our stands are folded, like the trees by the woodpile without any leaves. We have to step over Uncle Jan to reach our stands. He is lying on the floor at Tante Verna's feet with a pillow propped under his head. Tante Verna chats with Mr. Adducci. She says things like, "ciao," and "arriverdercci," and then gently taps his arm and laughs.

Joy is the first violin to start but instead of the waltz she begins on the piece across the page: a rondo from Beethoven, a piece we have never played in public. I let my violin hang at my side for a moment and look at her. "Joy," Kay says softly.

She stops playing and looks around at us. "You guys," she whispers, as if she doesn't understand why we're not following her. But my dad, Mr. Adducci, Uncle Jan, Tante Verna, and most of all my mom can all hear her, whisper or no. Mom looks at me and then Liza as if we'll explain.

"Girls," she says firmly. "Now's the time to show our neighbor what a lovely quartet you are."

We go back to our music and there's a moment of silence while I count out the beats and nod my head in the rhythm. Joy begins again, on the rondo, even though I was counting for the waltz. I focus all my

energy on the black eighth and sixteenth notes and try to erase everyone's presence. My legs are planted in a solid V on the ground and when Joy finishes stumbling through the first stanza, I lift my violin to join her. Out of the corner of my eye I see Liza shake her head but poise her bow, ready to strike.

I feel like my neck and cheeks are burning up, my skin flashing like a red light. Liza, of all of us, knows it best and I can hear her loud and strong. She plays the stacatto section so quickly that I imagine her bow bouncing off her strings. She's pushing us to pick up the pace. I try to play faster, but my fingers feel thick. We sound like a tangled mess and my mother stares at Joy with a heavy gaze. The little balls hanging from her ears are perfectly still and if we stopped I'm certain they'd begin jiggling around and she'd say, how could you do this? How could you? I feel terrible and that uneasy feeling begins pulling at my stomach.

I look at Mr. Adducci over my violin and his eyes are closed and he rocks back and forth a bit in time with the music. On his knees his hands quietly tap, but it is not a rhythm any of us are playing.

Suddenly my mother rises up, circles her hand as if to say continue and heads back to the dining room, pacing by the table. I don't think Mr. Adducci has even noticed she's left. His eyes are still closed and he rocks in his spot.

When we finish playing through the piece once, Liza whispers loudly, "Don't repeat." And we all play the last note as if the rondo is over and even Joy follows Liza's direction.

"Well, girls," my mother says from the dining room. "We know what we have to work on now." But before my mom can finish her sentence, Mr.

Adducci is sitting on the edge of the couch clapping. His arms are outstretched and he smiles and looks at each of us. Dad and Uncle Jan and Tante Verna follow his lead and begin to clap as well. Tante Verna chuckles as she claps and Uncle Jan puts the back of his hand over his eyes and laughs too. While Mr. Adducci applauds he takes a moment to point his clapping hands as each one of us. "Bravo," he says. "Well done. Well done." And then my sisters and I begin to giggle as well. We set down our instruments and balance our bows on our stands and we begin clapping too. We clap and take bows to each other. Joy strolls before the couches and bows before Dad, Tante Verna and Uncle Jan, and Mr. Adducci. Kay, Liza, and I do the same, but I'm laughing and my stomach is shaking too hard for me to bow gracefully. So I shake my father's hand and bend down to grasp Uncle Jan's and then Tante Verna. When I reach Mr. Adducci he stops clapping and clasps my hand with both of his. I imagine my small hand inside his warm, chafed ones is like a seed encased in an apple. "A talented young girl," he says and smiles. And I feel my face and neck get hot like when we were playing, but I smile back. When I look back at the dining room, my mother is gone.

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When my mother comes back she apologizes for excusing herself and sits next to my father, putting her hand on his knee. I bring the chairs back to the dining room while Kay collects the music and closes up the wings of our stands. Mr. Adducci still sits on the edge of the couch but now he looks at Uncle Jan. "Do you think you can sit?" he asks. Then he holds up a hand to me and says, "Tilly, will you leave two chairs for us?"

"Yes," my mother says. She stands for a moment and looks around the room, but then says, "After that, why don't you girls clean up in the kitchen."

"We're done in there," Joy says and she stops for a moment from putting away her violin and looks at Mom.

"There are dishes in here, and the *banket* needs to be put away." She moves her finger in a circle as she talks to indicate the plates on the coffee table. My sisters and I pause for the slightest moment and Mom squeezes Dad's knee.

"Yes, girls. Do as your mother tells you," he says. I gather up the plates, and Liza the tea cups and we file into the kitchen. But once the dishes are on the counter, we quietly move to the doorway and crouch down. Through the legs of the dining room table and chairs, we can still see Uncle Jan and Mr. Adducci and the back of my mother and father's heads.

Tante Verna gets on her knees by Uncle Jan and helps him slowly sit up. He turns to face the couch and leverages himself with it as he struggles to stand. Mr. Adducci follows Uncle Jan as he limps to the two chairs left in the centre of the room and holds him by the arm. "How long has it troubled you?" he asks.

"It started the year before we got married and ever since. Four years," Uncle Jan says. He grips the sides of the chair and slowly lowers himself onto the seat.

"Your hips are uneven," Mr. Adducci says and takes the seat across from him.

"They've always been that way. But the pain just started in the last few years."

Mr. Adducci sits down and adjusts his chair to face Uncle Jan, so their knees almost touch. When he stretches out his hand, a thick metal band around his wrist, resembling a brass handcuff of sorts, peeks from beneath his cuff.

"You need one of these," he says and taps at his wrist. "It absorbs your pain." He transfers it from his wrist and and latches it around Uncle Jan's.

Mr. Adducci pauses for a moment and closes his eyes. While his eyes are yet closed, he stretches out his long chafed fingers and grasps my uncle's legs. Slowly, he slides his hands down Uncle Jan's thighs, over the knee-caps, and down his calves. Uncle Jan closes his eyes too and it is so quiet in the room they seem to be the only two breathing. Mr. Adducci runs his hands down Uncle Jan's legs several times. Each time he does it, he intersperses touching Uncle Jan's legs with shaking his hands out like someone flinging off excess water.

My uncle's breathing becomes faster, loud and quick. "*Goodjie mensen*!" he says. Good people! "My legs feel so hot."

"Mr. Adducci!" my mother suddenly says. "Mr. Adducci!" She stands and our view of Mr. Adducci and Uncle Jan is blocked. "I'm sorry, Jan. But this will not go in this house. This house--this is a Christian house!"

My dad is standing now too. "Nan," he says and massages her shoulder. "Relax."

"Don't tell me to relax. We're just supposed to be having coffee and a visit."

Mr. Adducci, Tante Verna, and even Uncle Jan are standing now. Jan hobbles to my mother. "Nan. Please be courteous."

"No," she says. "This is not a matter of courtesy, and I'm sure Mr. Adducci understands that." She looks at him and then back at Uncle Jan and Tante Verna. "What about 'flee when the devil tempts you?' and not dabbling in affairs strange and foreign? Doesn't that mean anything to anyone else but me?" My mother does not yell but speaks loudly and firmly. She backs away as she talks, moving out of the circle with the other adults. "You're welcome to come to church with us, but you cannot practice your strange religion in my home. None of this hocus-pocus moony stuff."

She goes to the front door and opens it. There is a wind outside, and the faint smell of Mr. Adducci's duck ponds blows through our house. When she turns around she catches us in the doorway and this time she yells. "Girls, get downstairs." Without waiting to see if we obey, she steps past us and walks down the hall to her bedroom. And I want to stop her and explain about his hands, but the door is shut before I even move. Liza and Kay file downstairs but Joy and I stand there, watching Mr. Adducci put on his coat. He smiles at us from across the room and Uncle Jan and Tante Verna quietly murmur apologies, arranging a time to visit him.

When they go outside I feel my legs move beneath me and I almost surprise myself by running out to Mr. Adducci on our gravel driveway. It is drizzling again.

"Mr. Adducci," I say. And when I reach him I take his hand and hold it tight in both of mine as if I can sap everything out of it. "Will you teach me to play the mandolin?" I ask.

But he doesn't answer my question and just tossles my hair. He nods to Uncle Jan and Tante Verna and my dad before turning around and heading across our lawn towards his house.

When I walk back home, I see my mother standing at her bedroom window watching us. And I keep looking at her as I get closer to the house and when I get inside, I run downstairs and don't stop until I reach my bed and can look past the woodpile to the edge of Mr. Adducci's lawn. I had not noticed before, but he has planted the silver maples, and they spot his yard like tiny brown arrows stuck in the grass. A few of them even have leaves.

Charm Course

In a building behind the protestant school, a group of nuns had locked themselves away for life. Ellen's mother, a doctor, told her, "They're different because they cloister themselves and they're Catholic. But we're protestants and *in* the world, though certainly not *of* it. That's what John Calvin was all about." Ellen understood this to mean she could do things that the world (everyone not in the universal Christian Church) did, like have a girls' group or a boy's club, but she had to reform these activities for God.

Her mother pushed back a strand of gray hair that had fallen from her bun and patted Ellen's knee. "Remember who you are and what you stand for when you're in the house of God," she said in her thick Dutch accent. She did not look at Ellen, but across the parking lot to Marsha, the head counselor, who stood on the church steps, leaning against a wooden pillar. A fierce navy sash, teeming with white triangular badges, crossed her white polo shirt from shoulder to waist. And it was she who presided over the parking lot full of children.

It was 4:45 to 5:00 pm or so, Wednesday night, the twilight hour. The Busy Bees, Cadets (the boys), and the Calvinettes raced up and down the pavement playing TV or Freeze Tag, protected from the street by thick laurel hedges. They were a mad jumble of children, all reckless with their uniforms: yellow smocks with appliqued smiling bumblebees; tan shirts with the Young Calvinist Federation insignia; and the Calvinettes' navy skirts, white t-shirts and midnight blue scarves lined

with badges. Most girls in the class had earned a badge for each Gospel, but Ellen's scarf held a bare spot where John should have gone. She'd frozen, unable to recite chapter 3:16 when the time had come. "If you can't say it," Marsha had said, "then you must not believe it."

But Ellen's mother had said that was ridiculous. Since when did rote memorization suggest spiritual maturity? But according to Marsha, if you made one exception to the rule it wasn't being fair to all the others. Before Ellen left the car, her mother said, "Tell Marsha I still think you deserve the John badge." Rather than risk her mother coming out and doing so herself, Ellen agreed.

As she made her way towards Tina, she turned back and saw her mother pulling out of the parking lot. Her short frame was a tiny sillouette within the bulk of the overpowering station wagon. Ellen pictured her mother in medical school in the early sixties, when hardly any women were enrolled. She imagined her mother at the operating table arguing with the head surgeon saying, "That's ridiculous." Her mother didn't have Marsha's style or grace, but Ellen believed her to be a pioneer, suffering in a man's world.

Ellen held Tina's hand and they ran from the other children, towards the hedges, which divided the school proper from the convent. They nestled in a small dirt crevass over which the waxy green leaves of the laurel bush hung, their knees smashed together. Over the din of the cars driving by and Marsha calling all the children inside, convent bells could be heard.

Before they joined the others, Ellen spotted a dull gold Nova cruising the avenue towards the school. Three boys hung out of the windows, their hands gripping the sides of the car. "Nazies," they

screamed in the children's direction. Their mouths seemed like black gaping holes and their eyes scrunched into tiny slits.

Tina tapped Ellen on the arm and said, "Watch this." She bent low and stuck her arms through the scratching branches and twigs until her hands pushed through to the other side and gave the boys the finger. Ellen laughed and tried to force her hand through the hedge, but the car had already passed.

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The cadets met in the sanctuary while the Calvinettes assembled in the basement of the church. The Calvinettes sat in rows according to class and Ellen and Tina made their way to the back where the other eighth graders were--the Charm Course girls. Overhead, the cadets' irregular marching pounded through the ceiling and Marsha could not call the girls together until the stampede upstairs had quieted down.

"Calvinettes," Marsha called. They rose to attention, the backs of their calves pushing against the metal chairs as they stood. "What does the Lord require of you?"

All together: " 'To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.' Micah 6:8" And with that, Calvinettes commenced. Marsha led the girls in hip Christian songs not in the hymn book, like "For Those Tears I Died," and "The Wah Wah Song." In some ways this moment, this time of standing and singing was the most splendid of the whole evening at Calvinettes. The boys' stomping around would start again as they rose to attention, but the Calvinette's voices drowned out the sound. Above the song words, Ellen saw the letters for guitar chords. She imagined them as black notes on a striped staff in her

piano book. Somehow, mysteriously, inexplicable to herself even, her voice transformed the black letters into a harmony, hovering always two or three notes around the melody. The alto lines came naturally to her. For moments or so, she closed her eyes, although her mother considered charismatic. Ellen loved to sing. She and Tina were asked to sing at the Mother-Daughter Tea every spring.

The Tea! The Tea! How Ellen longed for this evening. For four years she had attended each Tea and performed skits or dramas, demonstrating for the mothers the fun they had in Calvinettes. The culmination of the evening was always the grade eight Fashion Show. The lights would be dimmed, a white crepe runner stretched the length of the room and the church basement would be transformed into a Parisian model's runway. Each girl wore two outfits: a casual daywear outfit and her eighth grade graduation dress.

When Marsha dismissed them to their individual classrooms, she pointed to the nursery for the Charm Course girls. She stood erect like a bronzed statue, her arm outstretched towards the nursery, her white badges gleeming against her navy sash.

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In a Sunday School room, Marsha sat with her hands folded on the table, smiling at the girls, waiting for them to settle in their chairs. Ellen stood by the coat closet with Tina who stretched out the skirts of the long formals each of the girls had brought.

"This one's mine," Tina said. She pulled out the satiny folds a white dress.

"That's perfect for a winter," Ellen said.

"My mom made it."

Ellen held her summer color swatches in her hand and pulled a lavender taffeta dress off its hanger. She had taken several metro bus rides to the mall, put the dress on hold once she found it, and convinced her mother that eighty dollars for a dress was really not unreasonable considering the once-in-a-lifetime-nature of this occasion. "Half," her mother had said. "I'll pay half." Ellen borrowed seventeen dollars from Tina and paid the rest herself.

"It's still as beautiful as it was in the store," Tina said. Ellen nodded.

"Girls," Marsha called.

Ellen rehung her formal and followed Tina to two metal folding chairs. "Let's get started, before Sonia gets here," Marsha said. "You all remember Sonia Shaddley, right?"

She didn't have to ask twice. The council had reprimanded Sonia and Mr. Shaddley for raising their hands during an especially moving service. Following that the Shaddley's left the church for a more charismatic denomination.

Ellen's mother had been relatively unfazed by this new development. All she had said was, "Ach, this will pass." But Ellen remembers the first Sunday that fingers could be seen hovering over the heads of the congregation; her mother had gripped the pew back in front of her and stopped singing. In the end, her mother was right. The Shaddleys and a few other families left the church; the council would not budge.

Marsha instructed them to turn to the Proverbs 31 quote in their handbook. "Tina, why don't you read that aloud for us," she said.

Tina read: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value . . . Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, he praises her: "Many women do noble things but you surpass them all." Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Proverbs 31: 10-11 and 28-30."

When Tina was done, Ellen closed her book and sat on her hands.

"Of course, it's perfectly alright if you're a doctor or something else too," Marsha said and smiled at Ellen. "You don't have to be a homemaker." This seemed legitimate coming from her because she, herself, was a housewife. "But I think Proverbs gives us a good picture of what kind of women we should be," she said.

While Marsha began the prayer, Ellen kept her eyes open. On Marsha's lids was a perfect watercolor blend of greys and dark blue. The cool ivory foundation raised the hairs off her cheeks a bit and Ellen thought of the cilia of sea urchins. Her lips moved like satiny fuchsia ribbons around gleaming white teeth and after she said "Amen," Sonia Shaddley came through the front door.

She wore black tights and leg warmers the color of cotton candy. Her makeup was flawless. Whatever her pentacostal leanings now, Sonia Shaddley could do hair and make-up like nobody's business and they all knew it. "Okay girls," she said after Marsha greeted her, "Tonight, let's try to be as fashion forward as possible."

"Girls," Marsha said. "Get your dresses on and then line up for your make-overs. Have your color swatches ready." She reached over and touched Ellen's arm and smiled. "I'll start with you."

When Ellen and the girls returned to the main room with their formals on, they approached the table with quiet veneration: Sonia and Marsha had opened two large tackle boxes. Jutting out of each box were four graduated trays filled with every imaginable color of eye-liner and tubes upon tubes of lipstick, plastic kits of rosy and peach blushes, and eye shadows divided into dozens of colored squares. The girls revered these names: Maybelline, Cover Girl, Max Factor.

Ellen settled herself in a chair and laid her swatches on the table. The week before Sonia had done each of the girls' colors. For Ellen, she said winter, but Marsha wasn't so convinced. Look at those rosy undertones of hers. "Well, whatever it is, you can fudge into both seasons," Sonia had said. Marsha was more cautious of this two season diagnosis and strongly recommended Ellen see a professional either at Nordstroms or the Bon Marche'. "People think they can fudge, but really they look washed out if they're in the wrong season." Before she had left that evening, Marsha had mouthed to her *summer!*

Ellen sat down and through the thin taffeta, the curved metal felt cool under her legs. The lavender of the dress matched nothing in the room. Marsha leaned over and examined Ellen's face and then draped a white cloth around her neck. Shifting her glance between Ellen's face and the tackle box, she laid out two eye-liners, foundation, blush, and face powder. "Don't use black eye-liner," she said. "It makes you look deathly." Marsha spent ten minutes on Ellen. Ellen closed her eyes and felt Marsha's soft fingers on her face, and the feather wisps of the

brushes on her eyelids. But when the transformation was done, she shook her head at the geometric streaks of blue and peach. Marsha might get the colors right if she had more time to experiment. It seemed unreasonable that such gorgeous colors like Arizona Turquoise and Crushing Cranberry would not cooperate with Ellen's skin.

Nancy was next. She was the only girl from the public school in the group. Her school did not have eighth grade graduation but for the fashion show, she had scrapped together an outfit. She and her mother were only occasionally seen on Sunday mornings, never at the evening service. Even when they did come, they only sat in the very back of the sanctuary. She stood by Ellen's chair waiting for Marsha to finish and Ellen tried not to stare. From head to toe Nancy was completely red: red turtleneck sweater dress with long sleeves; red ribbed tights; red pumps. And it was June. She seemed almost ablaze against the tan walls.

Ellen, flustered for a moment, unsure if Nancy was serious or mocking the whole Tea by her appalling outfit, rifled through the tackle box and pulled out Sheer Cherry. The least Nancy could do was get the lipstick right. "Here," she said. "This will match."

Nancy reached for it, but before her fingers touched the tube, Marsha swatted her hand away. "Just wait," she said. "It may not be your color."

Marsha handed Ellen two index cards and said, "You need to describe in detail your graduation dress, your casual wear and where you got your outfits." At this, Tina turned away from Sonia and smiled sympathetically at Ellen. Here, at daywear, Ellen's mother had balked.

"Eighth grade graduation is ridiculous enough. When I was in Holland, I had two outfits: one for Sunday and one for the rest of the week." Her mother had not even looked at her while she spoke, but kept rinsing dishes and stacking the dishwasher.

"That was during World War Two. You were poor." Ellen had said. "This is America and we need to live like Americans."

"We never knew we were poor until people told us we were. You want another new outfit, we go to K-mart. But no more of this Bon Marche' business."

It seemed Ellen's mother had little understanding of what exactly went on during Calvinettes. Perhaps the name gave her the false impression the girls discussed and analyzed the Heidleberg Catechism or the Belgic Confession. Her mother loved these doctrines. They were the golden baton stretching across the Atlantic handed down from her father and his father, and his father's father and so on, from Holland, to John Calvin's Geneva, all the way to Rome and the early apostalic church, Paul and Jesus Christ himself.

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Tina's mother dropped Ellen off on their way home. From the top of the driveway Ellen saw the kitchen light glowing through the family room--a huge wall size poster of Saturn was illuminated. In the room, it seemed as though you were standing on the rings. Her parents were at the dining room table playing Boggle. The Oxford English Dictionary with a magnifying glass stood next to the letter tray as well as Webster's New Universal Dictionary. Books randomly lay about counter tops, end tables and shelves, especially near the dining room table for

quick references during Boggle games or evening meal debates. Among these books were: Astronomy: The Cosmic Journey; The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church; Youngs Literal Translation of the Holy Bible; Studying Greek and Hebrew: The Basics; The World Almanac; several books on the history of the English language and volumes upon volumes of the *American Medical Journal* her mother subscribed to. Ellen lay her scarf on a book about mind puzzles, and a Rubix cube.

The house was intensely quiet as her mother and father stared at the lettered tray between them. The timer slowly filtered sand through its hourglass shape and Ellen's parent wrote quickly and cleanly in their precise European print--each letter exactly the same heighth and all straight lines, no seraphs of any sort. They wrote on medical notepads shaped like true hearts, ventricles jutting to the sides of the sheets. These sheets resembled other pads lying on the counters, also in shapes of major organs. They had logos like Zoloft, Cataflam, and Diflocan. Ellen's mother got them from Grand Medical Rounds--meetings she attended every other Thursday to hear about the latest technological developments, and new techniques. Pharmaceutical firms always handed out paraphernalia advertising their latest wonder drugs, among them Prozac refrigerator magnets. "What does it matter?" her mother had said. "At least it keeps the notes on the fridge."

As long as Ellen could remember, her parents had played Boggle every night before going bed: three rounds, only five letter words and even then, they were only worth one point. They let the sand run through the timer two times before exchanging words. Her mother recycled the paper they used. Often sheets of paper lay around the house with words like: pelter, litre, titer, triode, squeal, and

squama. "Don't throw them out," her mother would say. "We can use them for a few more rounds."

Ellen's father, also a doctor, but of Astro-Physics, munched on five saltines and had a mug of instant decaf coffee next to him. Ellen's mother ate a windmill-shaped speekulaas cookie from the Dutch store and drank from a flowery tea cup stained tan on the insides. This was their nightly ritual.

"Mom," Ellen said when the timer ran out. "Can we talk about getting my daywear outfit?"

"Yes, love, we can talk about anything," she said and set her pencil down. She smiled as though they hadn't had this conversation before and leaned towards Ellen. Although she didn't wear any make up, her skin was satiny and smooth. Her eyelids drooped a bit but there was only clean white skin around her hazel eyes.

"Tonight I saw what everyone's wearing and everyone's mom got them new stuff."

Ellen's mother sat back in her chair and shook her head. "You know what I said. I'm willing to go shopping with you, but not anymore to these fancy-schmansy places."

"Dad," Ellen said. But he was leaning over the Boggle tray and studying the words, not paying attention to them. "Dad." Ellen spoke louder.

He looked up and smiled at Ellen, sympathetically, the way Tina had.

"Can you please explain to Mom that this is important. Do you want your daughter parading around in rags?"

"Ho ho," he laughed and patted Ellen's hand. "Don't try that one on me. That's your mother's department."

"Fine," Ellen said. "Let's go tomorrow, and just look at the tragic options K-mart offers."

"Okay, we've said enough on that topic, yes? Either play a round with us or go to bed. I'm tired of your nasty attitude."

Ellen fingered a pen for a moment and then looked at her mom's silvery hair swept into a bun at the base of her head. Only her martyred past could forgive her lack of style. "What about medical school in the sixties, Mom?" she said. "You must have been a real pioneer. What did all the men in your class think of you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, weren't there people telling you you were in a man's world? That you should get back in the kitchen?"

"I never thought about that. Everyone was very helpful, lending me their notes and so on. I could barely speak English."

"No harrassment from anyone? What about your dad? He was from the old school."

"That's not true. He was worried I'd be too smart for a husband but told me to do what I thought was right. 'Discover what God intended for you and be that,' he told me." She leaned over and kissed Ellen's cheek. "Beware of feminism, my dear, its roots are in something yours aren't."

Ellen stood and shook her head as she headed towards her room. "What does that mean?" she said, but she didn't want to hear the answer and kept walking down the hall.

From her bedroom, Ellen heard the rattle of the Boggle cubes as her parents set up one last round. Instead of getting ready for bed, she drew pictures of her graduation dress on models in different positions, copying poses from *Seventeen Magazine*. On one model, Ellen colored in a white doctor's coat. She sketched the woman in a cartoon strip as a panelist on the Oprah Winfrey show. In one frame the woman explained how to give emergency tracheotomies with a ballpoint pen and in the next frame she gave an audience member a facial. Finally Ellen went to bed because she couldn't decide whom she wanted to be: the woman, an audience member, or Oprah Winfrey.

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The evening sun poured into the church basement windows as the Mother-Daughter Tea began. Mothers stood in new pastel dresses, chattering and smiling, clutching their handbags in front of them. Ellen found their table and left her mother in the safe keeping of Mrs. Bajema, the third grade teacher. Her mother wore a black dress with shiny threads of gold, red, and silver woven into the cloth. Around her waist was a gold rope belt resembling a curtain cord. Ellen had begged her mother not to wear this dark sparkly dress, reminiscent of a scene in "Saturday Night Fever." It was a spring tea, for crying out loud. But all Ellen's mother said was, "Don't be ridiculous."

The Charm Course girls clustered in the nursery which was set off from the basement by huge accordian-like doors. Along the walls hung their outfits: the formals all shimmering with dazzling hope and the daywear outfits hung in plastic bags ironed and pressed. Ellen had cut

off all the K-Mart tags of her pink walking shorts, and the white imitation Ralph Lauren polo shirt.

All the mothers and daughters arrived in their finest. Laura's mom, Mrs. Veltkamp, came with a wide brim straw hat and a sexy fitted dress with buttons down the front. For years Tina and Ellen had tried to imitate her walk and the gorgeous sway of her hips. They thought Laura also tried to imitate this as her hips jerked forward, reaching for the same effect. Mrs. Veltkamp was the only mother Ellen knew who kissed her husband in public and wore incredibly short skirts. "They're for tennis," Laura would cry. "It's okay because they're for tennis!" It was true, every year Mrs. Veltkamp won the tennis tournaments at the Warm Beach Family Bible Conference.

As the sun set, the basement dimmed and filled with shadows. Illuminating the entire room were candles floating in glass bowls that had been set on mirrors. Marsha blew into the microphone on the stage and instructed everyone to find their seats. "Have a look under your plates everyone," she called. "There's a smiley face under one plate at each table. Whoever has it can take the centerpiece home."

Ellen and her mother looked under their plates and found nothing. Ellen caught her mother's eye and smiled. In return, her mother nodded and blinked both of her eyes at the same time. Ellen whispered, "That's not winking, Mom. A wink is with one eye."

"That's alright, dear," she whispered back and blinked both of her eyes again and smiled. Ellen glanced around the table to see if anyone was watching them. Mrs. Bajema had heard the entire exchange and winked with both of her eyes at Ellen. Ellen smiled but quickly looked away, irritated that Tina wasn't at her table.

Following Marsha's opening prayer and Laura and her mother recited, "Ode to Mothers and Daughters," the eighth graders were excused to prepare for the fashion show. In the nursery, Sonia and Marsha had spread out cosmetics on a long folding table: blushes, eye-shadows, and lipsticks everywhere. Two full length mirrors leaned against the rows of cribs stacked three high. Although Ellen was one of the first girls to reach the room, it took only seconds for the room to be filled with girls in undershirts and trainer bras. Tina, Laura and Ellen had recently graduated to the "Gro-Bra," something Ellen had been utterly mortified to buy. Her mother had refused to go in the JC Penney dressing room with her and tell Ellen if it fit in all the right places. She just sat on the stool outside the room and had asked, "Do you want it? Okay, let's go."

Time was running out and Marsha and Sonia finally told the girls to do the creme, foundation, and powder by themselves. They would make the finishing touches with eyeshadows and blush. Laura got confused and coated her face with "Peach Sunburst" thinking something with peach in the title would match an autumn complexion. But it was much too dark for her white, freckled face and a thick line ran along her jaw and chin, marking the edge of the color. Ellen had just finished stepping into her lavendar dress when Marsha whispered to her, "You're on in just a second."

Ellen stood at the door of the nursery while Marsha zipped up her dress.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Marsha said. "Be sure to keep your shoulders back and look straight ahead."

Ellen smiled and kept her hand on the oversized, silver doorknob, too large for any wandering toddler's grip. On the other side of the door she could hear the mothers' applause and quiet chatter as Laura made her way down the runway. As the clapping died down, Ellen could hear Laura's heels reach the end of the runway and click on the linoleum floor. A faint cough came from somewhere in the room.

Ellen stepped back when Laura entered the room and then out into the auditorium. All the mothers had positioned their chairs so they faced the nursery door as she came out. The faint cough had grown stronger but Ellen concentrated on walking with precision and grace and listened to the pastor's wife reading the notes about her dress. She focused on the podium directly before her. When she reached the end of the runway, she turned around, froze for a moment and searched the tables for her mother. When she found her, Ellen saw she wasn't even watching; she was busily carving up the chicken on her plate, holding it down with a fork and knife.

Ellen forced a smile at the mothers and then began her journey back down the runway, towards the nursery. The coughing she heard earlier had died down as well. But now, from the same direction, she heard a grotesque sucking sound, like someone slurping a glass's last few drops through a staw.

It was not until Ellen heard the pushing back of several chairs and the tapping of women's feet as they rose to stand that she glanced in the commotion's direction. The ladies at Mrs. Veltkamp's table were standing in a tight cluster around one chair. The sucking sound intensified and the other women stood as well, trying to see what was happening. Finally Tina's mother stepped away from the small circle

around the chair, revealing a bluish-purple faced Mrs. Veltkamp. Her body shook and she clutched the sides of the chair to steady herself.

"Dr. Bos," cried Tina's mother. "Please come here."

As Ellen's mother, who had already been heading across the room, ran toward the circle with Marsha and Laura in tow. Laura, crying, was restrained by Tina's mother, "Stay here, honey. Your mom's going to be fine."

Marsha reached Mrs. Veltkamp first. "Oh my stars," Marsha said and reached out to stroke her hand. "She's having a heart attack. Someone call an ambulance."

"Don't be ridiculous," Ellen's mother said. "She's choking." Without breaking her stride, Dr. Bos shoved between Marsha and Mrs. Velkamp, her gold cord belt swinging behind her. She positioned herself behind Mrs. Veltkamp's chair, her legs spread in a solid A frame. "Up with you, Mrs. Veltkamp."

She didn't wait for a reply but jabbed her arms under Mrs. Veltkamp's arms and heaved the woman from her chair. Dr. Bos knotted her fists below Mrs. Veltkamp's enormous breasts and violently jerked in and upward, in and upward, forcing gusts of air through the woman's throat. Over the shoulder of Mrs. Veltkamp, Ellen saw her mother's face redden and glisten; Dr. Bos bent her knees and sprang upwards each time she pumped Mrs. Veltkamp's diaphragm.

The other women clutched their throats as well, as if they meant to hold their breath until Mrs. Veltkamp could breathe again. Ellen wondered whether the looks of repulsion were directed at Mrs. Veltkamp or her mother. Finally, with one violent cough, Mrs. Veltkamp expelled a chicken bone. She massaged her neck and hung limply in Dr. Bos' arms.

The other ladies broke into spontaneous applause. The gold buttons lining Mrs. Veltkamp's dress bunched against each other as Dr. Bos still kept her arms wrapped around the woman. Slowly and gently, with surprising grace, Ellen's mother guided Mrs. Veltkamp safely to her seat again. Dr. Bos picked up a napkin and sweetly dabbed at the woman's forehead.

"Now," said Ellen's mother. "Doesn't that feel better?"

The women found their chairs again, and someone rang Mr. Veltkamp. A few ladies surrounded Ellen's mother and smiled and chatted with her, awkwardly patting her on the back.

Ellen, now sitting and breathing heavily, stared at her mother, hypnotized. The violent, determined face now turned sweet and compassionate was almost unrecognizable to Ellen. It was not until Marsha reached out, held her hand and pulled her from her chair that Ellen remembered the fashion show.

"Come, dear," Marsha said. "Let's finish the real show."

The fashion show continued on to the end and the women occasionally glanced over at the two empty chairs of Laura and Mrs. Veltkamp. The girls resumed their creme and blush procedures in the nursery. It seemed unanimous opinion that Ellen walk the runway another time so the mothers could get a good look at her dress.

Once again, Marsha released her from the nursery and Ellen stepped out into the dimmed auditorium and made her way up the runway. When she reached the podium she again, turned, froze, and searched for her mother. She was watching Ellen this time and she nodded at her daughter, blinking both of her eyes. Ellen walked slowly towards the nursery door, but when she reached her mother's table, she stopped. She

wanted to hear the click of her shoes as she stepped off the crepe runner and onto the linoleum, towards her mother. And in that instant she knew her choice and she sat down and lay her head in her mother's lap.

The ladies cooed at the tender scene and applauded. Ellen thought that perhaps it was their discomfort of what to do. Or, she wondered, after witnessing the doctor's marvelous rescue of Mrs. Veltkamp, they too wished they could sit next to her mother and lay their heads in her lap. Beneath her cheek, the prickly gold cord, snaked across her mother's legs, and pressed in her skin. Someone alerted Marsha that Ellen was not coming back and the rest of the fashion show finished uneventfully.

When Ellen's mom drove their station wagon out of the church parking lot, the street was dark, quiet and still--long past twilight.

Foreign Expert

My offical Chinese title is *Foreign Expert*. Even though I'm only an English teacher, I am an expert at being a foreigner. I know to wear a government issue navy Mao suit at all times. I know to stuff my whistle-loud blond hair in a knit hat. While on the bus, I keep my head low and don't look anyone in the face and they don't know I'm non-Chinese. I listen to their conversations and learn the local accents, the lilts of the "r"s and the way they say "nigga" like I say "um." I repeat their dialects in my head. I speak it in my thoughts and then my speech is almost always right. In the last two years since coming to China, I have greatly reduced my chances of being confused or surprised.

I had been confused once, long before coming to China. When I told my best friend, Clarey, that I was in love with him, he said he was sorry, but there was someone else. A beautiful exotic woman from Afghanistan. It wasn't so much that he didn't love me, but the fact that I had been so sure he had. I had been so sure. But after the words slipped out of my mouth, it was like he took off his hat and revealed himself to be some thing I had never seen before. So maybe it was this confusion, or this need to master something, that drove me to China.

This afternoon I have taken the bus from the college compound into the city. This trip is cutting it short for my afternoon English sessions, but Winter Break will come in three weeks and I need to purchase a train ticket to Beijing. When I walk from the bus stop to the station, I recite all the Chinese dynasties I can think of: Zhou

1027-221 B.C., Qin 221-206 B.C., Han 206 B.C.-A.D. 221, and so on. I think it's important to recite this hard-to-retain information; it gives you that edge you need as a foreigner to survive in this country. I have heard it said that knowing the history is key to knowing the people.

I have to stop with the recitation when I enter the train station--there's a crowd of people around a caucasian woman, of all things. She stands in the lobby in a long white coat, surrounded by fifteen or twenty peasants who all wear Mao suits like mine. I haven't seen another westerner since I left Beijing in September. With her long, wool coat, and towering height, she instantly reminds me of the world across the Pacific. I admit, I'm curious what she's doing here, but it'd be smart to just walk away. Inexperienced Americans traveling through China usually cause enormous disturbances in daily living. And frankly, the Chinese don't need that. On tours, these loudmouthed travelers ask their guides all the wrong questions like, what did you think of Tiannamen Square in '89? Or, what's it's like living in a communist country? Don't you yearn for freedom?

The woman pulls out a phrase book and smiles gorgeously at the crowd. It's my guess she's new to the country. Who wears a lightweight skirt and pumps while traveling in China? She stumbles through a sentence that sounds like garbled Chinese for *where is a convenient hotel with western toilets*? The peasants pause and a quiet moves through them. But they quickly begin again with a barrage of questions. From their puzzled looks, it's clear they didn't understand her Chinese.

I can't get to the ticket booth without elbowing my way through the crowd, so I just join a group of peasants off to one side and wait for someone to figure out what to do with her. I bend my knees a little so my head is level with the people around me. Her smile is full, and even from the distance I can tell she's wearing lipstick. She points to her phrase book, and holds it out to the crowd as if hoping they can read the Chinese characters. While doing this, she speaks to them in English, saying, "There, now. What's all the fuss? Can anyone help me out?"

But the men just shake their palms at her. *We can't read,* they say. *Just tell us what you want.*

The train station manager's office overlooks the entire open building and he soon comes barreling down the stairs to join the crowd. He gives the woman a slight bow. He holds his arms stiff at his sides and I think he's nervous about this foreigner because he tugs nervously at his pants with the slightest motion. I find myself copying his action feeling my thick cottoned legs and I must admit, she makes me nervous too. I can already tell she'll upset the balance here.

Where is your letter of introduction? he asks her. *What is your business in Siping?*

The woman only smiles and tries out the phrase *I don't speak Chinese*. This they seem to understand and everyone begins to look at each other and chuckle, saying, *She doesn't speak Chinese! She doesn't speak Chinese!* The peasants are laughing and shaking their heads. I interpret this to mean either they are amazed they understand this foreigner or amazed that a woman so tall and chic, who doesn't speak a word of Chinese, got off the train in remote Siping.

A woman next to me is laughing and she touches my sleeve as if to say, *can you believe that?* Without thinking, I look at her. As soon as she sees my face, she sucks her breath in and quickly withdraws her hand. She is a short middle-aged woman and her eyes widen as she looks at my face.

Mei guo ren? she whispers. *American?* Gently, I try to cover her mouth, signaling that she keep our secret. But she leans forward for a closer look, and then loudly, without waiting for me to reply, she shouts, *Mei guo ren! Mei guo ren!* From behind, I feel a hand on the back of my head, and suddenly my cap is gone. I can imagine the sight of my blond pony tail tumbling out from underneath my hat. People clap and the woman who identified me says, *You are very clever.*

I lunge for my hat from the man behind me and yank it back on my head. "Piss off," I say. People swing their attention between me and the other caucasian, not sure who to watch and I want to sink to the ground, out of sight. Hands begin to tug at my sleeves, and lead me towards the new arrival. *Talk!* says the woman who recognized me. *Talk to each other.*

And then the woman and I stand face to face. She has a warm fuchsia smile, cheek bones that seem to bubble up beneath her skin, and leaf-green eyes. She's wearing brown eye-liner. Most striking is her short black hair, streaked with deep purple. It is sharply angled at the sides and the layers are marked by definite lines. Someone grabs my arm and wraps it around the woman's back. *Americans*, they say. *American friends.*

"How do you do?" she asks and sticks out her hand. "I'm Rasvene."

"I'm Ruth," I say. She has a french manicure and doesn't sound American or British, or anything else English for that matter.

"Well, I'm certainly glad you showed up. I was going to Harbin for the ice festival, but the train kept getting colder the further north we went." She smiles like we've just met at a barbeque and adjusts the floral bag over her shoulder.

"Do you need help getting back on the train?" I ask.

She laughs. It's the kind of laugh that makes me think of cocktail parties and political fund raisers. I think of Marilyn Monroe singing "Happy Birthday" to JFK, sighing out each syllable with hot, adulterous breath. The woman shakes her head. "Oh no. I think I'd like to stay here for a few days, but my Fodor's Guide doesn't say anything about Siping."

That makes sense, I explain to her. There's only one westerner here and that's me. This city isn't designed for tourists--hotels won't take you without a reference letter from the offical government travel bureau. She'll have to stay the night at Foreign Guest Hotel on the school compound, where I live. That's where the city's one interpreter works, I tell her, and he'll want to keep an eye on her. It's the Chinese way, distrust. And I explain that I know because I live here and I have a masters degree in Chinese Cultural Studies from the University of Toronto.

"Are you Canadian?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Just went to school there."

"Oh, I am."

But her accent still sounds strange to me. Something I can't quite place.

"Are you traveling alone?"

"Yes." She says this plainly and looks around at the crowd, smiling.

The train manager steps between us and waves his hand at me. He wants to know if we need anything, and are we okay? I explain I've never met this woman before; she accidently got off the train here. When I ask about trains back to Beijing, he says there will be one tomorrow, early, and he will set out the flag for the train.

"Do you want to go back to Beijing tomorrow morning?" I ask, but I mean it as a suggestion.

Rasvene sighs and smiles at the station manager with a nod.

Irritated, I say, "Don't nod. Here, that means 'no'."

I suggest she head to the school to meet Wen Fu, the interpreter. We are able to push through the crowd and I don't offer to help with the roller-suitcase she drags behind her. I explain to the station manager that the school's interpreter will probably bring her in the morning. I say Rasvene is a Canadian tourist excited to see the beautiful country of China. And, of course, he appreciates this compliment of his country.

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When we get outside, Rasvene decides the bus is much too crowded for her. "I think I'd faint with all those people. Let's take a cab," she offers.

But I say no. I don't need to be flaunting my wealth, I tell her. The Chinese have it bad enough.

But Rasvene simply won't get in line with her roller suitcase.

"You can take a cab," I say. "I'll meet you at the school." So I leave her there and elbow my way into a crowd that is merging as a group into the aisle of a bus. As we pull on to the street, everyone on the bus vies for a view of Rasvene. She is bending down by a cab, holding her phrase book through the window.

When we finally reach the school compound, I head for Wen Fu's office to tell him about his upcoming visitor. Stopping briefly at my apartment, I grab The A,B,C's of China; Rasvene should read this if she ever wants to get out of the country. Outside the larger cities like Beijing and Shanghai hardly anyone speaks English and the locals will instinctively be wary of her. I wonder how she ever got to China in the first place.

When I get to Wen Fu's office, the door is ajar and I can see Rasvene, of all people, sitting in the olive green vinyl chair across from Wen Fu.

"Rasvene," I say and enter the room. "How did you get here so fast?"

"Ruth!" says Rasvene and stands and shakes my hand. "You should have seen the cab driver. What a Jehu!"

I withdraw my hand. In Chinese, I explain to Wen Fu that Rasvene and I just happened to meet at the train station. This is all very strange, I say. Behind his desk, Wen Fu smiles. He says something canned about being glad for American friends, but I can tell he's unsure about the whole situation by the way he stamps out his barely-smoked cigarette.

"What are you saying?" Rasvene asks.

"I told him about finding you in the train station. It's unusual to have travelers stop off in Siping. How much did the cab driver charge you? Usually they overcharge if you're a foreigner."

Rasvene flaps her hand at me as if to say, you won't believe this. "It was free! The whole ride home the driver smiled so big, and he kept saying, 'hello' and 'Coca-cola'. I think I made his day."

"Well that's certainly lucky," I say. "It will probably be too early for me when you leave tomorrow, but you may want this." I hand her the book.

"Thanks," she says. "But how will I--"

But I cut her off. "You can keep it." And I head back to my apartment, and shut the door, confident that in the morning things will be back to normal. In my gut, I know I shouldn't care, that another westerner invading my corner of China should be of little consequence. But I can't help but feel relieved that tommorrow, when I step outside, things will be back to classes from 8-12, lunch, afternoon preps, dinner, more studying and then to bed. Like clockwork.

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The next morning, after teaching two sessions, I don't walk directly back to the Foreign Guest House. Instead, I go to a local store I frequent. It's the only place on the compound where I can buy canned tomato paste, and the shopkeeper's Mandarin sounds like the Beijing standard. It's good for my language acquisition. I rather like her. She has a vague understanding of an American's needs, keeping a

few canned goods on hand and occasionally Coke or luxury soap from England.

Next to the store is a precarious looking shack, used as a barber shop. As long as I've been here, it's been largely ignored--a residue of some previous, home-grown, entrepeneurial endeavor. The building isn't different from most others around here: a little hut made of plywood sheets wrapped around crooked bamboo poles. Through the plastic windows I rarely see much business.

When I walk out to the street, I see a crowd of people gathering outside the shack next door. They struggle to get positions at the windows. I swing my bag over my shoulder and elbow my way towards the window, like I knew the Chinese are used to doing themselves. A few people recognize me as the university's English teacher and they step aside. *Let the American through! Let the American through!*, they say. When I get to the window, the crowd closes up behind me and seals me in, pressed against the thick transparent plastic. On the other side of the window, in the middle of the one room shack, stands Rasvene, behind the barber chair that was always, until now, vacant.

She wears a white, scoop-neck shirt with lacy ruffles around the shoulders. And like me, she wears a hat, but I have never seen anything like it: velvet with red and orange silk flowers bobbing around the rim. Her skirt, long and flowered, swishes a bit from side to side as she examines her "customer's" head from all angles. At points she stops and lifts the girl's hair, sliding her fingers over the length of the strands. The girl, a student I don't recognize, covers her mouth with her hands and very nearly shakes with giggling. Rasvene's lips move--

she's probably chatting away with this girl who can't possibly speak a word of English.

There are clumps of black hair on the floor and what is left on the poor girl's head sticks out this way and that, in all different layers.

I find my way to the door. Even before I walk through the long dangling beads, I feel the heat pouring from the shack through the long strings. "Rasvene," I say, when I go inside. "What are you doing?"

"Ruth! Good morning," she says. "I just met this lovely girl and offered to give her a hair cut."

"Did she even understand what you offered her?" The girl had probably been too embarrassed to say no.

"Well, you know, pointing, and my little phrase book. We're having a marvelous time."

In the corner of the room is a tiny wood stove, and already my neck felt hot and sticky beneath my scarf. "What about the train to Beijing?" I ask.

"Last night I had a brainstorm that it'd be much nicer to stay in one place than traveling around. Maybe I should make a cultural exchange or something, I said to myself." She tells me she owns her own beauty shop in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and has a husband and little girl. She had some vacation time coming to her and had always wanted to *have a little visit to China*. She seems ignorant about what she has gotten herself into, as if going to China is like driving from Toronto to Buffalo for the day.

She stops with the scissors and looks at me. "Maybe I could do some hair here in this village for a while."

Do hair! "City," I say. "This is a city with plenty of Chinese beauticians." I gesture to the owner of the shack, who sits by the stove.

"Yes," she says and laughs, like I've made a joke. "But these folks were so excited to have me here. I bet I can give them a boost in business."

"Wen Fu said it's okay?"

"Yes. He says to make my stay official, I'll have a language lesson every afternoon."

"The Chinese aren't too given to change. Most of the girls here like their hair long and one-length with bangs." As I speak, I find myself backing towards the door and tug at my pant legs with my fingers. My long-johns are sticking to my skin. "My advice for foreigners is: don't impose yourself on the people. Listen and learn--that way you won't confuse everyone or make them wary of you."

Rasvene, concentrating on the girl's head now, says, "Yeah, good thinking. I'll probably see you at dinner, in the Foreign Teacher Dining Hall."

I stop. "You're eating there too?"

"Yes," she says and the flowers on her hat jiggle up and down as she nods.

"Well, sometimes I cook for myself." And I back into the beads.

"Bye-bye." I turn around one last time and Rasvene waves, like a stewardess at the end of a flight.

I want to walk slowly to cool off. But once outside, I have to move quickly to push through the crowd and to get away from the hot blast of air coming from the shack. For the first time since I got

here, I regret that another westerner isn't at the university with me. I need someone to agree that yes, this situation is strange. That a Canadian beautician who arrives in a remote Chinese city and simply offers her services is bizarre. When I get back to my room, instead of reviewing my afternoon lecture, I lay my Chinese flashcards around me in a circle. The characters are more than a written form of their language; it comforts me to know these pieces of art have been practiced with precise flourishes and strokes for eons. In almost 5000 years, they have changed little. I repeat each word and with my finger draw the characters in the air. Not even a kooky hairstylist from Canada can upset the balance and symmetry of the Chinese.

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The students are beginning to ask questions. There are rumors and whisperings about why Rasvene is *really here*. Some say she is a mental patient, others a spy. Some of the students are convinced she is a representative from the United Nations, here to inspect the pollution problem. She had been seen taking a walk the other night and along the way, she collected as much garbage as she could carry. But despite everyone's speculation and hesitations, the shack is crowded whenever I walk past it to and from the classroom building. What is funny about all of this, irritating in fact, is that they just can't see it. The most absurd of all, is that Rasvene is in fact who she says she is: a beautician from Manitoba. In many ways, this is the alternative that makes the least sense.

I hold English Hour in the library on Thursday afternoon and get my smallest turnout all term. Only three students come, among them,

Allison, who tutors me in Chinese and is always faithful. "Some students are practicing their English with the new *Foreign Hair* expert," she tells me. "We are so excited to have her in our village."

"City," I say. Emphasis on city. My students keep calling this city of two million people a village. They want to be interpreters and can't tell the difference between a village and city. I am considering canceling the English Hour, but decide to keep on in case other students come.

I begin seeing students around campus with their hair hacked to chin-length, a few are from the English Department. In the U.S., chic one-length bobs or stylish angled cuts signals hipness or character, but here it looks ridiculous. Has the political supervisor reprimanded anyone for being showy and flashy?

Rasvene is at the salon regularly. Nine to five. When I see her in the halls of the Foreign Guest Hotel, she always waves at me and says, "Off to work" or "just taking a break and then it's back at it." I suggest to Wen Fu that the school take her on a driving tour of Siping. At least that will be informative. But he says he has no time for such an outing before the New Year's Festival.

On Tuesday, a week after Rasvene has settled in, Allison is ten minutes late for our tutoring session. When I hear the knock at the door I am prepared to recite my most recently learned Chinese greeting, *lai lai lai--come, come come*. But when I open the door, I freeze for a moment; the girl is almost unrecognizable. Her hair is sharply angled above her ears.

"Allison," I call her by her English name. "Your hair." I reach out and crunch the small wisps she has gelled to her cheeks.

"Miss Ruth, I apologize for being late, but Miss Raven was shearing my head." The sharp, brittle strands poke my fingers.

"A *haircut*, Allison. In English you would say Miss *Rasvene* was giving you a *haircut*." I stand solidly in the doorway and decide not to let her in. Allison's haircut makes her unfamiliar, almost American even. This may be fine here, but what about when she goes back to her parents' home for the New Year's Festival? She preempts me and cancels our appointment before I can.

"I apologize that I won't be able to keep our appointment, Miss Ruth. Su Hui and I must speak with Miss *Ras-vene*," she slowly sounds out the name, "about the culture lecture."

I look at my watch to check the date. "I'm not scheduled to do a culture lecture for another month."

"No, no, no, Miss Ruth. Not you, Miss Rasvene. She will lecture to us about Canada and being a Foreign Hair Expert." She waits for a moment and I know she wants me to signal that our conversation is over. She wants me to walk her down the hall and see her to the stairs, in polite Chinese fashion. But I stand my ground.

"Well, then, I'll see you tomorrow."

Allison looks down at her shoes, as if confused about what to do.

"Okay," I say. "Off with you." But before I shut the door I decide to ask, "How much is she charging you?"

"Oh, Miss Ruth, it is so wonderful." Allison smiles again. "She says that if we tell her about our hometown, or family, or teach her some Chinese, it's free. The students in the other departments are jealous because they cannot talk with her. But it's free for them anyway."

***

On Friday night, I head towards the auditorium usually used for showing films. Rasvene is to lecture, on what I cannot possibly imagine, but I want to hear her, if only to see her humiliate herself. There is a mob of students outside the building and Wen Fu collects tickets from everyone before they are allowed through the turnstyle.

I go to him. "You're making people pay for this?"

"Ruth, you have come! Welcome. We distributed tickets because otherwise the room would have been too crowded. Everyone is curious about the Foreign Hair Expert."

"I didn't get a ticket," I say, suddenly feeling foolish. "I didn't know."

Wen Fu glances at all the students. He is shorter than I am and wears big boxy glasses. While he talks to me, he sucks on a fat Chinese cigarette. "There are so many here," he says. "But, perhaps there will be room to stand in the back? Or maybe an extra chair?" The ashes at the end of his smoke lengthen and he doesn't pause to tap them off.

He doesn't want to tell me to sit in the back. This is the Chinese way--don't say *no*. Suggest options in such a way that the other person will know what to chose. In polite Chinese etiquette, I should offer to stand and then he's off the hook from sticking me with a bad spot. But I tell him I'll sit anyway. I've had enough of this Cult of Rasvene.

When I get in the auditorium I take a seat in the last row. Allison is at the podium, ready to introduce Rasvene, who is still sitting down. Even from the back of the room, Rasvene's black hair

blends with all the others, but I spot her in the front row, the streak of purple bright and arrogant, like a flourescent light.

Allison delivers the introduction in Chinese and then Rasvene goes to the front. She's wearing the same white coat I saw her in at the train station--it's freezing in the hall.

"Thank you for inviting me to speak in your village," she says. Allison is off to the side translating.

The students can't hear Rasvene very well. The English students lean forward in their chairs, and turn their heads to the side so their ears face her. It is incredibly still in the auditorium, except for the low purr of Rasvene's voice.

"I guess in Canada, if two million people live together we'd call that a city. But from what I hear from you English students, that's quite small for a Chinese town."

There is a quiet in the crowd, the only sound is Allison translating, and then laughter breaks out. *Yes, yes*, my neighbors say to each other. *We certainly are small for China!*

At this, I stand and decide to leave. She has no right to do this, counter my teaching in this way, simply by being beautiful and rare. She's only a beautician, for God's sake.

"We are all many branches of the same tree," she is saying as I leave. And I don't think a single student realizes I've left, the ones sitting next to me just stare at the stage, snapping sunflowers between their teeth.

***

On Monday morning, as I leave my second floor apartment, I can hear Rasvene all the way down in the lobby. She speaks loudly: "Please, I'm trying to call Canada. I need to speak to my husband."

I walk softly down the last flight of stairs and see Rasvene's back. She is resting her head in one hand and with the other, she presses the receiver of the ancient rotary phone against her ear. It is the first time I have seen Rasvene in something other than impeccable linen and rayon skirts. She wears a light blue terricloth bathrobe and her frame against the backdrop of the chipped, stained counter seems small and fragile. If I had not known her I would have thought she was a child.

Suddenly she straightens up and jiggles the cord. "Operator," she says. "I'm losing the connection. Operator, *wei*," the only Chinese greeting she knows. "I need an operator who speaks English," she says, as if she can just pick up the phone in remote China and make a person-to-person call to Canada. At this I back up the stairs quietly back and wait until I hear her slam down the phone and shuffle down the hall to her apartment.

That afternoon, I arrange with Wen Fu for Rasvene to go with me on a driving tour of the city. I'm not sure what my intentions are. Perhaps to show her the *real* China--to show her how things are and have been for thousands of years.

Rasvene is hesitant at first. "What about work?" she says. She walks around the salon as she talks to me, straightening the plastic sheet she drapes around her customers, and rearranging the indoor slippers by the entrance.

I explain that her cultural exchange may be more effective if she knows a little bit about her surroundings. With this, she agrees.

Outside the Foreign Guest Hotel, thick steam coughs out of a grey Lada the school has provided for us, driver included. I creak open the car door and immediately feel its warmth, and I smell the cigars of the driver, and a musty unfamilar scent. Rasvene emerges from the front door, wearing slacks and this seems to me as an immediate improvement. It demonstrates that she's learning it's cold here; you can't wear just anything.

When she climbs in the car, her white coat sweeps across the door frame and collects a dirty charcoal streak. It's amazing her coat isn't even dirtier after a week in Siping.

"You know, in China," I say when she's settled in and I've told the driver to go. "Most people don't wear white because of the coal pollution everywhere, and, well," here I stutter, "white is the color for evil spirits."

She pointedly crosses her legs and smooths the white wool over her knees. Her purple streak catches the sun. "Did you invite me on a tour to show me around, or to make a commentary on my wardrobe?"

I feel my cheeks get hot. It's the slacks, I wanted to say, they made me think I could comment on the coat. But I just apologize, though really, I feel irritated. "I thought you would want to know," I finally mumble.

"I can't know everything. They don't expect me to know everything." Rasvene folds her hands together. And then, as if embarrassed at being at odds, she smiles and says, "At least this way I can go home with a little China dust."

"Yes," I say. "Of course, but it seems a pity about the coat."

We don't say much until we reach the city center. The driver takes us to the monument at the center of town, marking the final battle before China ousted the Japanese in the forties. We drive past the beer factories and a Buddhist temple. When we reach the peasant's market, I feel Rasvene's hand on my shoulder.

"Ruth, I hate to do this to you, but I've got to find a bathroom."

I stare at her and then find myself, like a mother saying, "This can't wait? Right now?"

Rasvene nods.

I tap on the front seat and ask the driver to find a bathroom for us. He immediately pulls over, turns off the car, and then turns around. *A toilet? Right now?* Rasvene is embarrassed and apologizes. She says she has waited as long as she could and just can't wait anymore. The driver leans back in his seat and then rolls down the window. He yells at a peasant walking by and after a few exchanges, the driver turns around and gives me directions to the nearest public bathroom.

The wind stings my cheeks and I ball my hands into fists as we head into the alley behind a long row of shops. At the end of the alley is a small square building that looks like it is made out of concrete legos. The two characters for "women" are painted in red on the wall and we climb the three steps and enter through the doorless opening. The only light in the room streams through the barred windows. Around the corner from the opening three long square trenches lay open on the floor. Light steam rises from the pits. There are two women in the corner.

Rasvene seems genuinely horrified by this little room, and it strikes me that this is the best thing that could have happened on this trip. This is life without *convenient western toilets*.

I tell Rasvene to be careful of the frozen urine next to the holes, joking that I don't want to hoist her out of the abyss. Rasvene is staring at two women huddled in the far corner. They clutch each other, looking like a bundle of padding and mismatched blankets in a mound. Small blue toques sit tight on their heads.

"They're just street cleaners," I say. "You can tell from their hats. They probably just came in here to get out of the cold."

Since we're here, I decide to utilize the facilities. Maybe Rasvene will feel more comfortable if I demonstrate. I lower my backside over the trench closest to the entry. My pee creates a steam bath, and the two women shuffle towards me, warming their hands over the pit I'm straddling.

"Oh my god," says Rasvene. And with her hand feeling for the wall behind her, she backs out of the building.

Before I leave, I give each woman some money and tell them to buy a warm drink. They bow several times in gratitude.

I find Rasvene outside, facing the wall and leaning her forehead against it. She is crying and won't look at me. "Get it together, Rasvene," I say. "Come on, pull it together. This is their life. They don't think it's so bad."

"How do you know?" Rasvene asks. "How do you know?"

And I don't have anything to say to that. I don't know the answer--I don't know what made me so sure of myself. So I just shrug my shoulders and say, "I just do. Trust me."

***

When we return from the city, Rasvene says she has a headache and wants to lie down. I tell the driver to drop me off at the classroom building. When I get out of the car, I don't even look at Rasvene. What am I supposed to say? Sorry life isn't the playground you thought it was? The tour seems to have disturbed her, but we could have just driven straight to the public bathroom and back, as far as I was concerned.

I march straight for my office to pick up my U.S. History textbook and notes. My yellow binder lies on my desk, waiting, like a holy book filled with true facts about the United States. Today is the lesson on Richard Nixon. I will ask them to tell me what they know of the ex-president. I will wait to hear about the great leader Ni-ke-son, who opened the door to the west. How he and Deng Xiaopeng shook hands on the Great Wall, how he honored his hosts and did not shy from eating silkworms, and how he built a beautiful red bridge across the Pacific. I will wait to hear this all before I take down their false perceptions. And then I will tell them that, after Watergate, on my side of the Pacific, all Americans know Richard Nixon was a crook. I will tell them that often, facts are raw and cold.

I enter the room softly. Every desk is occupied and the students are bent over their books, quietly reading. There are the same holes in the plaster by the chalkboard and the same standard lime green stripe around the base of every classroom in China. One by one, the students look up, and as I stare at the students, going from face to face, I realize Rasvene has gotten a hold of each one of them. In the end, despite my showing Rasvene what I think is real China, she has managed

to transform everything I know into something unrecognizable. The entire room vibrates with the intersections of wild hair lines. Bi-levels, page boys, bobs, Dorothy Hamils, short-hair shags, wedges, buzz cuts, duck tails and bowl cuts. I nearly lose my balance and grab hold of the podium.

In this instant of time, although I know I am here in remotest China, at the same time, I am back in Canada, on Lake Huron, as if this moment in the classroom and on the water are superimposed on each other. It is summer and Clarey and I have walked almost half a mile in waist deep water. We are heading towards a raft that bobs on the water's surface. Four ropes tied to rocks at the bottom of the lake anchor the raft. And it is on this raft I describe what has happened to me in our two and half years of friendship and what I suspect happened to him as well. I try to name what I think is love.

But when he says, no, there's someone else, it's as if he is metamorphosizing, the color of his eyes changing and shifting. More shocking than the fact that he doesn't love me is the fact that I think he does. I thought he did. While he is still speaking, I jump off the raft and begin running to shore. And when I look at my legs and feet through the sun-soaked water, they seem like a kaleidoscope of fragmented toes, and knees, and calves.

And I think it is this kaleidoscope--this collage of my body--that makes me cancel class.

I head back to my apartment, barely seeing the path, the trees looming over the concrete. Allison tries to follow me, asking, "Miss Ruth, shall I bring a doctor to you? Shall I bring a doctor to you?"

I know I'm walking in a jagged line, like a drunkard, and I know my pace is quick, but I simply want to lie down. Or I want to have a good look in my mirror and see if what I had always thought was there, still is. When I look next to me, Allison is no longer beside me, the trees are upside down and I rip off my knit hat and pull off the band around my ponytail. As I walk, I shake my hands through my hair and tossle it out like a madwoman.

When I reach the Foreign Guest Hotel, I find myself at Rasvene's door. I stand there for a moment and then I hear her voice behind me.

"Ruth, hello there. Just taking a break from work. My headache's all gone." She opens the door to her room and holds her hand out to enter, as if she's been waiting for me. And though I don't know why, I go in and she leads me to the kitchen, a replica of mine, where a rickety table and an old metal chair stand. On the table is a small mirror propped against the wall, the plastic frame with bunnies reading, "YOU'RE SUMBUNNY SPECIAL." There is also a cheap spray bottle, like the ones in the $1.00 basket at Payless. A scissors and comb lie on a cloth, as if she is expecting someone.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Do you have an appointment? I can come back."

"No," she says. "Sometimes students drop by, so I like to be ready. What can I do for you?"

I stand and lean against the fridge, trying to remember what I came for. "I just thought I'd stop by to see how you're getting along," I say eventually.

"I'm much better," she says. "I was from Lebanon before I moved to Winnipeg, so I'm used to culture shock. Please, have a seat."

"Thanks." I sit and so does she.

"I'd offer you something, but all I've got is tea."

I shake my head and feel unable to speak.

She seems to sense my awkwardness and says, "Has anyone ever said you have lovely hair? It's marvelously thick. I've never seen it down."

"It's a hassle," I say, running my hand through it. "Never does what I want it to."

"Nonsense," she says. She stands up and comes around behind me. "When did you have it cut last?"

I close my eyes and try to recall the last time I sat in a beauty salon. Her hands tug at the ends of my hair. "Probably before I came to China."

"Let me play with it." I feel her nearness to my back as she wraps her hands around all my hair. She pulls her fingers through it and tugs gently through the tangles several times. Her long fingers strokes the sides of my head, soothing and lulling.

"Do you want it cut? I think I can do something with it," she asks, her hands never leaving my hair.

I close my eyes as she massages my head. "Well," I say. "Okay, but not too much."

I hear the spray bottle squirt and feel the drops of water slowly filter through my hair down to my scalp. Her damp hands touch my cheek and finger through the strands of hair.

"I'm just trimming," she says. "Do you want some bangs? I'd like to see your eyes."

I begin to nod, but then stop myself. "Just a few wispies, okay? Nothing too drastic."

I can hear the steel blades snipping around my ears, in the back of my head, and over my eyes. The teeth of her comb glide along my scalp and her breath warms my forehead as she bends low towards my face, checking for accuracy. I don't know what I'm doing, why I'm here. But in the end, this seems to be the only alternative: to join the absurd.

After twenty minutes or so, she says, "Okay. Why don't you have a look?"

I open my eyes and see her leaning against the radiator by the window. She smiles and gestures towards the hand mirror. "Look," she says. "Look at yourself."

And when I lift up the mirror and stare into the reflection, I hardly recognize what I see.

Precis to

Behind My Grandmother's Back, There is Darkness*

This is the project that I plan to continue following graduation from Oregon State University. This began as a short story with an ending I deleted a few drafts ago. In my discussion with Tracy Daugherty, he encouraged me to consider lengthening this piece out and not to be intimidated by the size of a novel. The number of characters and complexity of different storylines suggests itself that this piece not be limited to a short story length. At this point, I envision the present day protagonist to be a peripherial observer of Marta, her grandmother. At the heart of the novel is the Marta's experience, but this experience is vital for the narrator's own understanding of herself and her past.

The piece as it stands now, seems a series of small cycles, forays made by the narrator into the past. Often her family is unwilling to give her the information she requests, so she imagines the rest. I'd like to explore this concept further--the concept of the narrator reinventing her past as juxtaposed to the past as it really was, if that is definable. The series of images and scenes are all connected by family and place. The specific plot movement of the novel as a whole, is undetermined at this point.

* The title is a quote from Grace Paley.

Behind My Grandmother's Back, There is Darkness

At twelve, I asked my dad, "What about the Jews? Did your family hide them during the war?"

I had been reading The Hiding Place about how Corrie Ten Boom and her sister were sent to Dachau. The Nazis caught them hiding Jews in their watch shop, just across the German border. Before going to the camp, Corrie was held in a Dutch prison for weeks awaiting a trial that never happened. She received a package from her sister-in-law with the address written strangely in diagonal fashion towards the stamp. She carefully removed the stamp and discovered the message in tiny print: *All watches are in the safe.* Corrie wept to know that her arrest was not in vain. As I read I wept as well, alone on my bed after school. I wondered if my family had a code; did they use their flower shop as a front?

"N-n-n-no," my dad stuttered. He was writing out math problems with his right hand and eating a cookie with his left. "We did nothing that spectacular. Maybe a few possessions from Jewish families. That's all."

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At fourteen I asked my dad, "What about the Nazis? Your town was occupied."

"Some say that I st-st-st-stutter because at six years old I saw the Nazis take my father to go to a labor camp."

"Is that true?"

"I did see my father taken away. But my stutter is Holland's own fault. No one in the schools was allowed to be left-handed, and I was forced to switch. Something went screwy in my brain."

"That's awful."

"At least now I'm ambidextrous."

***

At twenty-five I asked my mother for womanly advice. "You don't think 145 pounds is too much, do you?"

"For you?"

"Yeah."

"No. Let's see, you're 5'7"-5'8"--no that's perfect. It all depends on your bones and how you feel."

"I read a magazine last week that said I should be 135 pounds."

"It's always give or take ten pounds. You know, those people in concentration camps, if you were underweight--poof! You were gone. So you're okay at maybe ten pounds too much."

"Okay, Mom, so I'm safe if another Hitler comes around and this time targets the Christians instead of the Jews."

"Ach. Spotten mit Dominae." *You speak inappropriately with God's name.*

***

I am told my great-opa was a florist in Enschede, a small Dutch town along the southwestern German border. Every day his daughter, Marta, my oma, swept, dusted and set the flowers out in fine

arrangements. In Marta's pictures, she has wide eyes set far apart on her face and a long mouth with full lips. It seems as though her eyes, even without her trying, would never miss anything within their line of vision. They take in the entire landscape. Indeed, even now at eighty-nine, her eyelids don't droop or sag with age. She wears thick bifocals which magnify her large eyes, as if even in her old age, she will keep drinking in her surroundings and tucking them inside her brain.

In her apartment at the retirement village she showed me, eighteen at the time, pictures of herself as a young woman. On her floral tapestry couch, drinking tea from delft porcelain cups, we fingered through black and white photographs with scalloped edges. There was one of her linking arms with a young man in front of a tent. She held a cigarette.

"Did you smoke, Oma?" I asked.

"Ach, everyone did--it wasn't like here where people can't stop. They go crazy here."

I looked close at the man. "Were you camping alone with this guy?" I had no idea people in the thirties even camped.

"Oh-ho, there were many of us. Not just the man and I."

"What about Opa?"

She took the picture and studied it. She said, "This was before we are married. He must have had to work."

Everyday my opa, William John De Boer, or Weitze, as the family called him, delivered flowers to Marta and her father's shop. From the neighboring town he drove a cart into downtown Enschede loaded with fresh tulips and roses from his plot of land in the countryside. My oma

told me that Weitze and she agreed to marry but he did not have enough money. I wondered if Weitze was like Isaac working seven years for Laban before he earned the hand of the beautiful Rachel. But Marta herself frankly told me she was not beautiful. She was a nice lady who knew how to work hard.

"Money? Why wait for more money?" I asked. "Either be poor single or poor married."

"Why, you need it for a family. We were not urgent to be married."

My oma has no stories of early romance, secret kisses in the alley behind the shop, evening strolls along the canal, holding hands after the sun went down. She merely said, "When my father died, then your Opa comes and helps me take of the shop."

"What about love?" I asked her.

"Your Opa was a good man. A hard worker."

When her father died, Marta was thirty years old. I imagine an unmarried woman at thirty without a father or a husband was a community concern in the small town of Enschede. Every Sunday in church, she sat alone in the pews. Even if she was satisfied with this, certainly the rest of the congregation was wildly concerned about what to do with her. Perhaps she would have felt like an old maid sitting with the other single women who sat with their parents. And to be next to an unmarried man would only stir scandal. For a while, she did sit with her best friend, Lexi, and her parents, until Weitze came to live in Enschede. Before her father died, he contracted with Weitze to take over the shop and Marta and Weitze married shortly after the funeral. Weitze was ten years her senior.

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My father has told me what little he can remember from the days in Enschede during World War II. I have no idea what their family's shop looked like or the street they lived on. I imagine the street was a cobblestone road and their shop was sandwiched between two other stores with no alley way between. In the house above the shop, Weitze, Marta and Gerard, my father, led a cramped but satisfactory life. Off their windows were long planter boxes full of geraniums, tulips, and chrysanthemums. The house was two blocks from the main market place and three blocks from the Central Reformed Church.

My father tells me that when the Germans first marched into Enschede, his parents, along with everyone else in the city, completely ignored the parading soldiers. The night before, millions listened to Queen Wilhelmina's broadcast from England, saying the royal family had fled the country, but the people were not give up hope. People wept and despaired privately in their homes, but the day the conquering army entered the city, not a single person lined the road to watch them come or to even spit in their path. When my father went to the market that afternoon with his mother, all the Nederlanders walked quickly up and down the sidewalk, heading where they usually did at that time of day, as if oblivous to the tanks and rows of Nazis, twelve men deep, goosestepping down the street. It was the Dutch way of telling the Germans they were of no consequence, their presence would not be permanent.

During the war, church services continued as usual but church members from all denominations felt the pressure that their faith seemed

anti-patriotic to the Germans. But, despite this, every Sunday, Dominae Hellinga clearly articulated that loyalty to the state or a commitment to civility was secondary to allegiance with Christ. Weitze and Marta supported this position as did the rest of the congregation. In fact, despite the possibility of being black-listed, their church grew in numbers as the war carried on. Marta, Weitze, and Gerard began leaving their home twenty-five minutes before the service to arrive at the church twenty minutes early. This was the only guarantee of finding a seat with the dominae in view. In July of 1941, Marta noticed a particular woman with a bright, perwinkle-blue hat circled with a black band and black lace. She sat down towards the front on the left side of the dominae's raised lecturn. Marta stared at her for a full thirty minutes during the sermon before the woman turned her head for a quick glance towards the stained glass window. It was their neighbor, Mrs. Anema. As long as Marta had known her, the woman had not been in church.

I imagine when Marta greeted her after the service, she discovered that Mrs. Anema came for the signing. Her son had made a run for Switzerland with his Jewish wife. Dominae Hellinga and all the other protestant ministers and Catholic priests in the city had drafted a document addressed to the Nazi High Commissioner, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who had assumed control of Holland. The document declared allegiance first and foremost to Christ and his church and ticked off a list of points articulating the Christian community's position. Dominae Hellinga read the treatise in full including the points condemning the sterilization of Jewish-Christian couples. And, as always, though outlawed by the Germans, the church leaders insisted in continuing to

open their services with: *Dominae salvan fac reginan nostram*--Latin for *Lord, safeguard our Queen.*

A table was set up by the kneeling rail and the church secretary sat behind it. On the other side were two empty chairs and Dominae Helinga exhorted his congregation to participate in the signing. The entire church lined up section by section to approach the table and leave their signatures on the document. No one remained in their seat. While some waited in line, the organ played through hymn after hymn until all 801 people present had signed. Marta and Weitze sang for over two hours, except for ten minutes of standing in the aisle. Those couple of hours were the only time Marta can remember touching Weitze in church. He rested the back of his hand on her thigh while holding the hymn book. He did not look at her, but his hand on her leg weighted down by the book communicated his understanding that this was indeed a moment for serious reflection--a grave matter. Weitze, who could not carry much of a tune, dutifully sang each song, singing out the melody an octave lower than the others around him. And Marta knew he would rise with the others and sign. Most of them were just workers, like themselves, fruit sellers, shop owners, teachers, carpenters. Not much of an intimidating army. Marta herself sang each song and made each stanza a personal prayer. *Peace be on earth and to the people whom God delights in. Peace be on earth.*

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Weitze and Marta's identity cards made it clear they belonged to the Gereformaeerde Kerken, the more orthodox reformed denomination. It was rumored that a new German woman within the neighborhood of the

church was with the Gestapo. This woman would frequent "De Boer Flowers." My father told me the neighborhood called her the Stone-Face-Lizard. The Lizard was one of the few Germans who did not dress in uniform. I imagined her with sleek black hair and blood red lipstick. But my oma explained she was in fact a gentle-looking woman. She had brown coiffed hair and creamy peach skin not blemished by face paint. But not even this gentleness could alter her Gestapo status. At one point, Marta, on the way home from the market, heard of a raid on a neighborhood near the church. The Gestapo had heard some Jews being harbored by a family on the block, but they weren't clear as to which house to check. The Lizard and her men lined up every family on the street and were going to pick off the people one by one until someone confessed. Two men and a woman lay dead in the street before Artie Vander Beek stepped forward and said he had no Jews but merely a few pieces of furniture for a Jewish friend. The Nazis deported Mr. Vander Beek and his entire family that day, including three girls ages nine, ten, and thirteen. It was this same woman who weekly visited Marta and Weitze's store to buy flowers for the SS command station three blocks over.

"How's the shop today, Mrs. De Boer?" she would have asked Marta when she came. Every question she asked, even a simple greeting, would have sounded like an interrogation. If my father were ever in the shop the Lizard would compliment Marta's handsome family. "You have a fine boy, Mrs. De Boer and a strong husband--so lucky to be surrounded by such men," she said. "Perhaps this addition will also be a boy?" And she nodded towards Marta's stomach.

Marta simply rubbed her belly and pushed down her desire to flare up. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, this bunch should stand for the day."

"I'll come by on Friday to collect your tab."

"It will be ready on Monday. Come then."

Marta nodded and though the woman had not left yet, she ignored her and began collecting the scraps of stems and leaves off the counter and carried them to the back room. She felt a particular satisfaction when the Lizard left the shop, crossing under the portrait of Queen Wilhelmina. The woman might not acknowledge the House of Orange, but she still had to walk beneath the Queen to leave the shop.

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In 1941, Marta's second son, Evert-Bernhard was born. He came two months early and no midwife was available. By this time, the Nazis had taken over the hospitals and public services. Just across the border into Germany was a key steel producing plant which the allies bombed regularly, paralleling the blitzkrieg on London. The shelling echoed across the border as sometimes did stray bombs from Americans. The hospitals and all available staff were utilized by the Nazis to treat their wounded.

With the minister's wife and two other women from the congregation holding her hands, Marta lay on a bed in the middle of her dining room and desperately pushed to squeeze little Evert-Bernhard out into the world.

"Push," encouraged the dominae's wife. "It will be an honor to be born on the birthday of Prince Bernhard. They are lining the streets to

celebrate the House of Orange." This was true. Marta could hear the shouts in the street and the occasional bang of firecrackers. She gripped the sheets, pushing her son into a world where hope seemed to be on the rise. On that day, Weitze sold every orange carnation and tulip he had in stock. The labor had been going on since the early hours of the morning and in good conscience, Weitze felt he could not close the shop. They had a responsiblity to care for the resources they had been given. The human race had been having babies for eons and at such a moment, it would be arrogant to think they should quit what God had called them to do. Of course I imagined he listened intensely for a sound of change. A moment of silence when his wife was not groaning or when the women became quiet. Perhaps he even left the building to escape his wife's cries. But never for very long--lifting boxes, loading and unloading carts, and repotting plants can do much to take your mind elsewhere. While Weitze worked downstairs, greeting customers, the sounds of his wife's shouts were drowned out by the demonstrations in the street. And into this world, little Evert-Bernhard was born.

He lived a very short while. As Oma explains, he was never active but lay just so still, feverish and red for all three days of his life. Marta and Weitze's response was to move along. Keep working hard and don't let the past get in the way of you being a good steward of what you've been given. Just push all of that deep down inside of you and time will soothe the pain . . . to despair is sin. To want is sin.

Within a day and a half of Evert's death, Oma was back at work in the shop, even making some of the early morning runs to the countryside, letting Weitze sleep.

The Germans immediately responded to these rallies for Prince Bernhard and decreed any demonstrations for the royal family to be a direct act of treason against the High Commander himself, Adolf Hitler. The word *royal* was removed from all theatres and public buildings, and Crown Princess Juliana Street where the Central Church stood was changed to Anti-Communist Road. Weitze and Marta were instructed by their block official to take down the picture of Queen Wihelmina from their shop.

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My father has only told me once or twice the story of how Weitze, his father, was taken by the Nazis. What he can't tell, either by choice or lack of memory, I have pieced together from relatives and history books. In 1944, Marta was pregnant again, with her third child. By August, she was seven and a half months along. The small cupboard-like space in which Marta and Weitze slept must have been especially hot the night the Nazis came to their street. During the day, the door to their bed was folded into the wall and the dining room table was pushed against it. The narrow space collected heat all day long, turning the cupboard bed into an oven. She turned several times that night, trying to position herself in a way so that the baby lay well. In such heat, she had been uncomfortable for several weeks.

Sometimes during the night, Weitze put his dry, soil-stained hand on her belly while he was sleeping, as if instinctively protecting what was his. He wore no night shirt, only his *brookjies*. My father slept in the other room. Marta lay flat and put the back of her hand on her forehead. Even as she lay there, she sweated. Her head felt heavy and eyes wouldn't open.

When Marta got up for a glass of water, she heard a whistle in the street. Quickly she went to the window and looked onto the road. The Nazis had set up barricades on either end of the street, and were moving from house to house, slowing working their way towards the flower shop. *Razzia. Razzia*!

"Weitze," she said. "Wake up. Wake up. We are under *Razzia*."

Weitze sat up and was immediately awake, as though even in his sleep he expected this. He pulled on his trousers and shirt. The entire block exploded with German shouts and the sounds of slaming doors and heavy boots on the street. Marta stood quiet for a moment watching her husband. At forty-four his face looked sixty with its long sunken cheeks and the pouches under his eyes. Never being able to breathe through his nose, he sat with his mouth slightly open as he laced his shoes, the slow pant of his breathing barely audible. The scene was almost no different from the early hours of every morning, when he rose before dark to journey to the countryside for fresh flowers. Faithfully, he had done this six days a week for the entire nine years of their marriage. Who could deny that this was love? That each morning he was, himself, love? But push that down and don't let weeping or hysteria distract you from the matters at hand. *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed.*

Pack a bag. Marta jogged to the pantry and flung open the doors. She wrapped Gouda in a cloth as well as a loaf of dark rye bread.

"No," Weitze said. "That's too much. The Germans will feed us."

"The Germans? No, Weitze, the Germans will kill you before you take food from their soldier's mouths. You can go north--visit Nellie in Leeuwarden."

"Marta, I'm just an old man who sells flowers--not a Resistance worker. No one escapes Razzia--I have better chance of returning if I leave with the block now. What quarrel have the Germans with me?"

"God does not disapprove resistance to this authority."

Before Weitze answered, there was a knock at the door. My father watched from his bedroom as his father opened the door and talked with a man in uniform. The SS man explained that all the men between 18 and 60 on Teltingstraat were being requested for labor needed in Germany. He glanced at the Gerard, as if to assess his age. But, as part of the Gestapo, he already knew who lived here. Marta said nothing more but looked the young soldier directly in the eye as Weitze squeezed her shoulder on his way out the door. Marta instructed Gerard to stay inside.

Marta stood with her women neighbors who lined the sidewalk. The Lizard sat behind a table with an SS guard who stamped each man's identity card and directed them to a waiting truck. No one spoke. Marta said nothing, but rubbed her stomach in slow, rythmic motion. What was there to do but watch? Wait and pray. Wait and pray. The woman next to her along the sidewalk interruped the silence with the quick, heavy breathing of tears.

"Shush," Marta said. "Mrs. van Twillert--Astrid--quiet! Your husband will only worry all the more." She reached and gripped Mrs. van Twillert's hand. "Here--don't let the Germans have any of your tears. Squeeze all of it into my hand."

Within a half an hour all the men from the neighborhood were gone and except for the swastika flag over the intersection, there was no trace of what it was that made them leave. There was discussion among the women: a block watch, signals to look for if the Nazis came back to this street no longer with male protection. Annameka, Mrs. van Twillert's daughter, offered to take the cart with Marta each morning to get flowers from the countryside. A woman in such a condition should not make the journey by herself. Marta offered no protest but weakly smiled, grateful for the help.

When Marta returned to the apartment, she found Gerard still up, staring out the window, hoarse from crying. She scooped him in her arms and carried him to her and Weitze's bed in the cupboard.

"Okay, my young son," Marta said. "We must sleep because tomorrow we will begin doing all the work that your father needs done before he returns."

"I don't want to do my father's work. I want him to do it."

He pressed his back into Marta's stomach, and she lay still for several hours listening for faint sounds of trucks on distant roads.

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Toward the end of the war, all of Marta's neighbors had visibly lost weight, but fortunately, no one was starving. She received sporadic letters from Nellie in the north that food was scarce--some had even taken to eating tulip bulbs. In the shop, Marta shook her head at the wad of guilders in the till which were worthless to buy food with. For some strange reason, she was still receiving ration cards for Weitze, and she cashed in on this, getting extra food for Gerard.

One cold January day in 1945, Marta was in the back room, sorting the day's flowers. Weitze had been gone for five months. The bell above the front door rang and Marta wiped her hands on her apron and went out to the service counter. It was a German woman, Mrs. Tessie Mulder. Her husband was in the SS--not a fighting man--only a clerk in the post office.

"Good morning, Mrs. De Boer," Mrs. Mulder barely whispered. Her face was pale and her hair was barely held in a ragged bun at the top of her head. Several strands refused to stay put and hung limp about her face.

Marta nodded and waited. She saw that Mrs. Mulder was upset, but what could have so troubled this woman who still had her husband?

"I need to buy some flowers," Mrs. Mulder said in German.

"Yes," said Marta in Dutch. "What would you like to buy?"

Marta's Dutch retort did not appear to bother Mrs. Mulder as she scanned the shop and studied the flowers along the wall. Most of the morning's fresh bunches had not yet made it out from the back room.

"I need a funeral arrangment. Two. Just wreaths or half-circles, I don't care." Even as she spoke, she backed towards the door, her hand outstretched behind her to feel for the knob. "My brother and my father--both in Algiers. I'll pick them up this afternoon."

Marta stood for a moment after she left. Mrs. Mulder had been there barely two minutes. Marta whirled with the impact of two less Germans in the world and for the briefest moment felt a triumphant smile cross her face. She quickly went to the sidewalk and saw the back of Mrs. Mulder hurrying up the road.

"Mrs. Mulder," she called. The woman stopped and turned around. "It will be thirty guilders."

Mrs. Mulder froze as if she could not understand Marta's Dutch. Then she wearily raised her arm as if to suggest she understood and nodded. Marta could not take her eyes off Mrs. Mulder's back as she moved down the street.

Over twenty wives of German officals came in that week to buy flowers. I wonder how my oma felt in the back room of her shop, weaving together white and red carnations with laurel and ferns in the netted circles of funeral wreaths. Perhaps she wondered about the morality of selling so many Dutch goods to the enemy. About having her and Weitze's business profit because of the German occupiers. Or perhaps as she set each flower in an arrangement and saw all the scattered clippings on her work table, she was filled with a growing hope. A hope that this arrangement or the next one she made would be the cause for Weitze's return. She would have refused to drape these wreaths with maxims in German, insisting on Dutch being spoken and used in the shop. And sometimes she would have pointedly spelled out the mortal condolences in large, clear German print, communicating that soon she would no longer have to serve them.

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My father explained that his mother didn't receive any news about her husband until March of 1945. By that time, Marta had had her third son, called Weitze, Jr. The war was going so poorly for the Germans that the soldiers simply left the labor camp to join their forces on the eastern front. Weitze and the other men from the neighborhood, no

longer guarded, began walking home. For over two weeks they tramped through razed villages and scavenged through rubble for food. By the time they reached Enschede, they had not eaten for ten days. While she was working, Marta received news that Weitze and the other men were at the school building on the other side of town. They would be there for two days to be de-liced. Who knew what diseases these men had brought with them? Rather than close the shop in a fit of emotional outburst, Marta worked steadily and sent Gerard to the school with some bread, cheese and milk. If she sent the boy ahead, Weitze would know she was alright, and that she knew he was alright. In the meantime, he could be reassured that the shop was being kept up responsibly.

Did she arrange the same flowers over and over again? Dust the same spot fifteen or twenty times? Or was she more productive than usual, working like a hurricane to keep her mind off her husband? Did she madly finger through soil and fertilizer for unwanted insects--anything to keep her hands moving?

When Weitze walked in the door for the first time, Gerard ran circles in the shop, shouting his father was home. By the time he found Marta, her face was spattered with soil and her hair coming undone. Marta must have stared at him for a few seconds, before she completely took in the fact that her husband stood before her. She must have walked over to him and cupped his face in her hands, and slowly, silently, finally, began to weep. I think they must have stood there for many minutes, holding each other.

Marta led him upstairs to eat something and meet Weitze, Jr. The shop stayed open, and for those few moments upstairs, Gerard was instructed to watch the counter. Marta fed Weitze rochebrote--black rye

bread--with thick slabs of gouda cheese with sesame seeds. While he ate, he could not take his eyes off of Weitze, Jr. who lay in a basket near Marta's feet. When Weitze was done eating, he lay down and slept for the next seventeen hours, while Marta finished the day at the shop and got the cart ready for the next morning's drive to the countryside. Weitze would make the trip.